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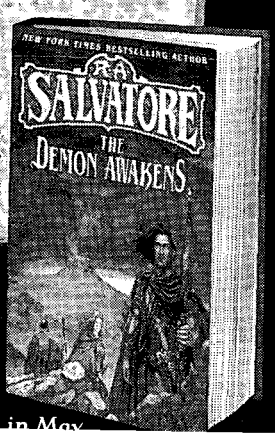

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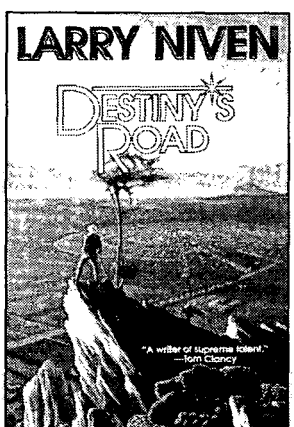

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EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 1806, MADISON SQUARE STATION, NEW YORK, NY 10159

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Commander Tom Cool of the U.S. Navy recently published his first novel, an inventive tale of high-tech skullduggery called Infectress. *His first appearance in these pages cleverly puts a new spin on the old problem of trying to be in two places at one time... which makes us wonder what Commander Cool is* actually *doing in his post as Deputy Director for Plans and Programs. Surely he would never take the steps Coupon has taken...*

Universal Emulators

By Tom Cool

HAVING CIRCUMNAVIGATED the globe several times, I had thought that I had known the sea. My limited experience had been deceptive. All of my voyages had been in tropical zones, circling the warm waist of the world. In a typhoon, the southern seas had been furious and horrifying, but never bleak. East of Iceland, as the *Sephora* steamed north, I learned how indifferent is the ocean. It has no color, mood or nature of its own, slavishly reflecting in hue and temperament the aspect of its master, the sky.

East of Iceland the sky was a cold, dreary expanse of lifeless gray cloud. Underneath it the ocean crawled on its belly like a cur at its master's feet. The ocean, which had seduced me while wearing the profoundest blue in nature, the blue of the tropical ocean under clear skies, crawled with a heavy gray, a hue more lifeless than slate, more dispiriting than the gray of rain-slickened tree branches in winter. Underscoring its bleakness was the knowledge that, if a man were to fall into these arctic

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waters, in five minutes the ocean would suck from him all his living warmth.

The *Sephora* was pitching as it bounded over the cold choppy rollers of the North Atlantic. Since the sea was following, the ship was rolling hardly at all. I stood in the private sponson off the master's cabin where no one could see me. And there was none to see. *Sephora* was a robotically controlled ship. No one was aboard except Cecilia and Coupon.

How many of my off-hours had I spent here, enjoying the tropical sun, smearing myself with sun-block to prevent burning a shade darker than my paradigm, Coupon. Now I had to worry about wind-burn, as the frigid wind sliced past my face. Zealously I applied lip balm. My lips could not be chapped and brittle, while Coupon's were moist and pliant.

Taking more weather than he did was a dangerous proposition. Yet I craved the weather deck, where, alone, I could try to remember who or what I was, other than one of the most deeply bonded emulators in the world. That day, the bleak scenery of the subarctic ocean reinforced my mood. My thoughts were heavy and troubled. I wondered how much longer I could go on. The end of my indenture seemed impossibly distant.

A sharp double rap — his signature knock — called me away from my own thoughts. I undogged the hatch and stepped back into the master's cabin. Here the warm air was scented with rosewood. The furnishings were simple but opulent; every plush chair and love-seat was bolted through the deep wool carpeting into the deck. The lighting was muted and indirect.

Looming before me was Coupon, my mirror image (or, more properly, I was his mirror image). We had the same tall, narrow head, cold gray eyes (gray as the sea, I realized), thin lips. We were wearing identical mess dress of Coupon's design: black slacks, gold satin cummerbunds, white short waist jackets with miniature medals, a light cotton shirt with a soft choker decorated with a ruby brooch at the throat.

"Is it too much?" he demanded. "Is it too much to ask that you wait for me here? I've got the Japanese calling every five minutes, the ball-and-chain wants a private word, I'm trying to visualize the next generation of SEE, and you can't tear yourself away from the weather deck for five minutes."

I bobbed my head. It was a mannerism learned from my Universal Emulators coach in client relations, a Japanese man rumored to have

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doubled for the Emperor for fifteen years. "I'm sorry, master," I said. "How may I serve you now?"

"The ball-and-chain.... Nah, I'll take her this time. I want you to run interference with the Japanese. Keep them off my back for two more days. Don't promise anything except they'll be happy when I pitch the concept."

"Yes, master," I said, disappointed he had chosen that task rather than interfacing with his wife. I worried that he was beginning to mistrust how convincingly I played the role of the husband.

I brushed past Coupon and pressed the ceiling-height mirror, which popped open to reveal the doorway into my cabin. Once safely inside, I logged into the covert surveillance network, so that I could monitor him through the rest of the day. Our knowledge of each other's activities had to be kept complete, lest one of us betray the other. Then I donned Coupon's business avatar and began to answer requests for communication, beginning with Morita, the Sony vice-president in charge of site-entrenched entertainment.

"Mr. Coupon, how are you?" Morita began. He was wearing his typical business avatar, a two-sworded samurai in green silks. Coupon's avatar was also retro, silk brocades based on the court dress of the Sun King.

"Fine, Mr. Vice President. How pleasant to see you. Are you feeling as fit as you look?" I asked in Coupon's most dulcet tones. In doing so, in posing as Coupon, I was committing several felonies simultaneously...and since he had shared his cryptocode with me, so was my paradigm.

An overseas Japanese, Morita was direct. "We here in Portland are very excited about your preliminary proposal. We are anxiously awaiting the full proposal."

By now I was wearing my paradigm's head. I was not acting like Coupon. I was Coupon, yet Coupon informed by my better judgment. It was a delicate balance, responding authentically as Coupon, but Coupon on one of his best days. I knew that he would have retorted irritably because of the recent stress, but I responded with a soft answer.

"Yes, well, I'm hard at work on that now. So much of the shine is in the polish, don't you think?"

"Of course you're right," Morita said. "Simply that we have a board meeting tomorrow. It might strengthen the project's support from the board if I could show them something. Perhaps a two-D rendering?"

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"Let me see if anything is worthy. One moment please...."

My avatar froze as I linked off-line with Coupon, who snarled, but shot me a two-D rendering of the new entertainment, an immersive Valhalla optimized for Russian males.

"How intriguing," Morita said, as the samurai studied a photograph of Nordic paradise. "And how much is natural?"

"Certainly all the mead," I said, chuckling. "Please, let me save the rest for the proposal. With your kind permission."

"Of course," Morita said, thankfully placated. "By the way, how is the sailing?"

We exchanged small talk for several minutes, then Morita as the superior took the initiative to sign off. In the confines of my secret room, I heaved a sigh and checked my other. Coupon was arguing with his wife. We needed him to work on the proposal. He should have sent me to see her. I scanned the transcript of the argument to date. I needed to return to the communication queues, but the fight was too distracting. It upset me. Here I was dedicating the best days of the best years of my life to him, shouldering his most tedious burdens, taking the brunt of his personal and professional shocks, freeing him so that he could create. Day after day, night after night, I proved that I could be everything that he was, I could do everything that he did, yet he had the name. My name was almost forgotten. Because the lightning bolt of employment had struck him and not me, I had no dreams of my own. I dreamed his dreams. I accepted his insults. All that I asked was to serve him. And here he was, squandering the time and the emotional energy that I saved for him on yet another stupid argument with Cecilia. He was savaging her, too. Sometimes I thought he brutalized her just to upset me.

"...getting fat and lazy," Coupon was shouting. "Don't you understand that I've got work to do? I've got to earn the money that you're so fond of spending."

"We're rich enough already, Frederick," Cecilia said in her pleading voice. "I just want more of your time. It gets lonely in here — "

"You're the one who wants to see St. Petersburg in February, well, here you are, complaining about how boring an Arctic passage is."

"I thought we might have some time together," Cecilia wailed. Then she said something unnerving: "I don't understand you! Sometimes

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you're so wonderful and understanding, and other times, like now, you're so bloody beastly — "

Coupon roared with anger. I stood up, afraid that he was going to hit her again. He loomed over her, his fists clenched. I fought my own compulsion to bolt from my hiding hole, dash down to her cabin and pull my twin away from her. Thankfully, he managed to chain the demon of his temper, venting it only in screams of obscenity. Coupon turned his heel and left Cecilia sobbing.

Moments later, he tore open the door to my room, crowding inside where his shouts would be doubly sound-proofed.

"What have you been doing to my wife?" he demanded. His face was flushed, the cords of his neck muscles strained. I could see the pulse in his jugular veins.

"You know what," I said. "What you've ordered."

"You're making her fall in love with you!" he shouted.

Looking up into his flushed face, seeing the blood-shot eyes and spit-speckled lips, I wondered how I could ever have considered ourselves handsome.

"I'm making her fall in love with you," I answered.

"I said that you could make love to her!" Coupon shouted. "I didn't say to go on about it for an hour!"

"We were having a good day," I retorted.

Coupon clenched his fist and swung at my face. Abruptly I stood, my left arm deflecting the blow, as I grabbed him by the lapels and jacked him up against the bulkhead.

"Never again," I hissed.

He could feel my strength. Our identical faces were almost nose-to-nose. I stared into his eyes and sought the glint of fear I knew would surface. When it gleamed like something arisen to the surface of a dark pool, I repeated, "Never again. You will never hit me again. And you'll..."

I hesitated, because it occurred to me that instructing the client not to beat his wife exceeded my brief as a professional emulator. Uncertain, I released his lapels, reflexively crushing my own so that once again our appearances matched. Coupon's breath stank as he hyperventilated so close to me.

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"We're — sorry, master," I said. "We're under pressure. We've got the deadline. Why don't you retire to the study, work on the proposal. I'll finish your communications. Later, we'll have calmed down enough. You could go to Cecilia then. Apologize."

"I'll be damned if I apologize to her," Coupon snapped. "But you will. And make it good, too."

"Yes, master."

"I don't want to have to bother with her again for two days. Or with you. I've got a deadline, dammit! I've got to pitch a 300 trillion yen SEE in two days, and the damned 3D models aren't even done, let alone the animations. Aren't I paying you to make my life easier?"

"Yes, master. I'm trying."

"Well, give the communications back-log the same attention you give to my future ex-wife and maybe we'll get something accomplished!"

Coupon turned on his heel, checked the spy hole to ensure no one was in his stateroom and left me alone with only his odor. I sat and wondered. After I had glimpsed the fear in his eyes, something else had surfaced, something colder and more deadly. Hate. In that moment, Coupon hated me, his other self. I hugged my ribs. I began to fear for my life.

It would be so easy. He could poison me or simply tip me overboard. A privileged conversation with the president of Universal Emulators, a surrendering of his employee insurance premium and I would not even be history. It would be as if I had never existed.

Then, the sister idea presented its seductive self: how easy would it be for me simply to tip him overboard. If I managed to avoid DNA typing for the rest of my life, then I could be Coupon. Not emulate him. Be him.

A new fantasy, so much richer and darker than the workaday one of fleeing with Cecilia. "My future ex-wife..." Lately, he had taken to referring to her as such. Was he doing it to torment me, because he had learned to read my thoughts as thoroughly as I read his?

I shook my head, then turned my attention to the communications. There were now eighteen high-ranking requests to communicate, plus hundreds of messages in his in-boxes across the Nets. Soon I fell into the rhythm of communicating as Coupon. It was soothing. While he began to orchestrate the overall presentation in the study, I tended to the hundreds of details. The Korean animators needed a tongue-lashing; imagine trying

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to use stock backgrounds in a Coupon presentation! Alexi, chief of the user group in St. Petersburg, had an interesting point about the spouse-acceptance factor; I summarized his drunken ramblings and shot the summary to Coupon. And that Zurich professor was still whining about historiocity! Was that even a word?

Hours later, I worked down to the textual interchanges. Fan mail from Duluth. Blue-sky futurizing with the MIT media lab. High-priced gossip about Microsoft's next move. He really was an incurable networker. If only he had built up a real staff and controlled his interactions, then he would never have needed an emulator. Yet that's how these employed people were: so fearful of losing control, so terrified of becoming one of the huge majority of the unemployed. The Net allowed them to be virtually everywhere all the time, so they worked until they stressed themselves to uselessness, shot themselves or hired an emulator to pose as them, first in the little things, gradually, in all things, even the most important...except presentations to the sponsors. After all, in the Net, you were who your cryptokey said you were.

And if your competition used class-B emulators, then naturally you wanted a class-A: some poor dupe, hiqhly educated but otherwise unemployable, who was desperate enough after squandering his youth preparing for a nonexistent job that he was willing to market his very self. Cosmetic gene therapy. Bone splints and grafts, hormonal treatments so that he smelled like you. Voice, posture, walking, sitting lessons. Someone willing to break himself upon the rock of economic necessity and heal in bonds so that he could emulate you during those tiresome cocktail parties. Someone who could even service your spouse while you were busy preparing for your next professional triumph.

Someone very much like me. Coupon's emulator. Whose name was just a scrawl on a contract locked up in a Yokohama bank, but when I remembered it, it was Jack. Jack Quimby, who had been a poor British boy raised in America before he became an American tax refugee, or at least the shadow of such.

So I worked the queue until they were down to only one, which I thought had been garbled in transmission since I couldn't decode it. Then I noticed the routing codes. Someone in Yokohama was replying to a message Coupon had sent. Was he communicating with my service in a

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personal code unknown to me? Perhaps he was checking the details on the clause of the contract that dealt with the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of the emulator.

I wrapped the message in a shell and shipped it for decoding to a discreet black arts group in Taiwan. Checking the time, I saw that it was almost four in the morning. Coupon was still working in the study. Now he was drinking; the alcoholic phase of his work marathons typically lasted twenty hours. That would give us time enough to crash, sleep, work another day and then make the presentation.

And so to bed. My paradigm had ordered me to Cecilia, and so I went.

She was lying in the dark with her back to the door. I shut the stateroom door and undressed silently. The curtains were pulled back from the portals, which glowed as redly as demon's eyes. Beyond the glass, the ship's running light was firing the swirling mists of a heavy sea fog. The weather was worsening. As the ship was beginning to roll, I stumbled as I crawled into bed.

I could tell she was awake, although she didn't move. Settling into bed, I began to hope that I would spend a peaceful night.

"Don't you love me?" she asked, her voice small and vulnerable.

"Yes, of course," I said, but on whose behalf I was uncertain.

"Why do you treat me so horribly?"

"One word, Cecilia. Stress."

She turned, so that the red light outlined hazily the curve of her cheekbone. Her eyes were black pools in shadow, yet they gleamed.

"Why do you keep pushing yourself so? Is it worth it?"

"Sometimes..." I said, intending to say, *Sometimes I wonder*, but I pulled myself up short. It wouldn't do to negotiate the master into a position with which he was uncomfortable. How well I knew that his priorities were work first, second and third, with Cecilia somewhere in the double digits.

"Sometimes...it may not seem like it's worth it," I said, speaking now for him. "But it's what I do, Cecilia. It's who I am."

"Who are you?" she asked sharply. "Who are you really?"

In the darkness, it was impossible to read her eyes. I couldn't tell at what level she was asking, so I answered at the level most comfortable for Coupon.

"Frederick Coupon, CEO of Bonus Enterprises."

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"I don't think you know who you are," Cecilia said.

"Maybe not. All I see in the mirror is the reflection of a man's face. I don't see myself except when I look at something that I made and I know that no one else could possibly have made it."

"I don't think you exist outside of the things you make," she said. "I don't think you're for real."

"Yet somehow the reality of my money is convincing," I said. That was pure Coupon, but she had wounded me.

"I want a divorce," Cecilia said.

"A divorce will only get you two million yen, if you remember the terms of the prenuptial. I'll give you three million yen right now if you would kindly shut the fuck up."

Slowly Cecilia raised herself to sit. I wondered if she had a butcher knife among the bedclothes. How unfair it would be to die as Coupon!

"That was good," she said. "But that was just getting too much like Coupon."

There followed a profound silence.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"You do him really well," she said. "It bothers me that you're making it harder to tell the difference. I always liked you better. I don't think I should have to put up with two Coupons. A tag team of jerks. I've only been putting up with him for so long because I liked you. Don't you get like him."

"I am him," I offered feebly.

"I think you're getting confused on the issue," Cecilia said. "But you are definitely not him."

"Who am I, then?" I asked.

"I've been wondering that for two years," Cecilia said. "Who are you?"

"I don't know."

"Who did you use to be?"

"Jack. Jack Quimby."

The lights flared. Coupon stormed into the room.

"That's just great!" he shouted. "You're fired, you idiot."

"No, you can't fire him," Cecilia said.

"What! He's fired!"

"It's going to cost you half of everything, then, Fred," Cecilia said. We both winced. Nobody called us Fred, just as nobody pronounced Coupon

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with the accent on the first syllable, at least not after the first transgression. "Because the prenuptial is void in the case of infidelity."

"But I've been faithful to you!"

"No you haven't," Cecilia said coldly. "When you sent this employee, this double, into our bed, you violated the monogamy of our marriage. Any judge would see it that way."

Coupon staggered. It was obvious that he saw the piercing, twisted truth of Cecilia's logic.

"And so until you're willing to give me half of everything you own," Cecilia said, "I'm calling the shots. And I don't want to see you anymore. And I want Jack here to...protect me. I feel threatened right now. Go away because I feel the deep urge for him to protect me."

Coupon's jaw sagged. He took a step forward, then one back, then he turned and fled from the stateroom.

Cecilia hugged me from the rear, her arms warm around my shoulders, her breasts pressed against my back.

"You do want to protect me, don't you, Jack?"

"If you'll protect me," I answered.

"Deal."

I collapsed into her arms. We made urgent love. She seemed to delight in murmuring my name, "Jack" and hearing her murmur it and then shout it and finally scream it was a perfect tonic for my wounded soul. When we were done, I felt more like my own self than I had in years.

"Who are you?" she asked, as I lay, head on her breast as she stroked my hair.

"An emulator. Universal — "

"No, who are you *really*?"

"Just...a fool who refused to be useless," I said. "I studied and trained for so many years. I always felt certain that I would be the one good enough to get a job. The months passed and then the years. And I found out that there were millions of men like me. Do you know what that's like?"

"Yes," Cecilia said softly, her voice deep with emotion.

"And I am good," I said. "He never would have gotten the Miami contract without me. Now I don't know what we're going to do. We can't go on like this, can we?"

"Oh no," Cecilia said. "He'll kill us first."

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My mind resisted the thought, but I knew that she was right.

"We'll have to go away," I said.

"Oh no," she said. "*He'll* have to go away. Do you really think that he would let us live, knowing that he's committed fraud thousands of times? His name is his reputation and his reputation is his business. We could ruin him. He'll never allow us to have that power over him."

"Why hasn't he..."

"He's thinking about it now," she said. "You know he is. He's been watching us make love and now he's thinking about what we're saying. He's working it out at just about the speed that you're working it out."

"So?"

"So I think you had better start looking for a weapon."

"But — "

"If you want to save yourself, you have to do it, Jack. So do it."

"And what about you?"

"You're more his match, Jack. Go."

Slowly I rose from the bed.

We had no weapons on board. Coupon didn't trust them. On legs as nerveless as wood, I stumbled toward the galley for a butcher knife, but then I realized that was where he would go. Since the study was closer to the galley than the master stateroom, he would beat me there. Looking for a weapon, I would only find him there, armed. So I turned and hurried aft and then downwards toward the engine room, where surely there would be a heavy tool such as a crowbar.

Then I stopped short. Would he second-guess me and go to the engine room instead of the galley?

For a long moment I stood swaying. The deck was increasingly unsteady as the weather topside grew nastier. It seemed that he was reading my thoughts and countering each impulse. Although I couldn't see him, our knowledge of each other seemed like a long tunnel of mirror images, each image slightly smaller, less precise and askew.

His almost perfect possession of my own mind enraged me. "I am *not* you!" I shouted.

Downward I hustled. I burst into the engine room, where I found emergency equipment secured to the wall. I had my choice of a sledgehammer, a fireman's axe and a crowbar. I chose the crowbar.

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Back up the ladders I hurried. Coupon was cowering in the galley, no doubt, clutching the butcher knife —

A sharp sudden agony pierced my back. Reflexively I wheeled, striking out with the crowbar. Through a haze of pain that reddened my sight, I saw the tip of the crowbar clip the temple of the head identical to mine. The lucky blow stunned him. I raised the crowbar again, but it seemed we both were down. I remember wanting to strike, but I don't remember striking.

Hours later, I rose once again to consciousness. I was face-down in a postoperative sling so all I could see was a communications station moving, while my own body hung unmoved. The screen fired into the image of Cecilia's face.

"Jack," she said. "You're going to be all right."

"I feel fine," I said. "I feel wonderful."

"You're heavily sedated," she said. "The surgery system had to fuse your left kidney and repair some nerve and muscle damage. It'll take you a few weeks. But you'll be fine."

"Yes. Yes. And..."

"He's gone," she said. "You left quite a mess, but it's been cleaned up. I'm wiping the janitor system's memory now."

"He's...in the ocean?"

"Under the ocean. Chained to ten kilogram free weights."

"Gone."

"Never talk about him again," Cecilia said. "Now, are you up to making the Morita pitch in eight hours?"

"Possibly."

"It would be better. Failing to make the pitch would be suspicious."

"I know. And it's such an important pitch. Let me check how far he got in pulling the pieces together."

"Give me the cryptokey, darling, and I'll help."

"It's nothing you can help me with."

"Yes I can," Cecilia said. "I'm an emulator too."

Her naked statement stunned me. For a long moment, I stared into the image of her eyes, finally beginning to see the truth.

"On whose behalf?" I asked.

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"I don't know," she said. "Either she put me in place because she wanted to escape from him, or he put me here because he killed her. It's a double blind contract. I don't know. I think she's dead. But I'm trained, Jack. I can help you. Give me the cryptokey, please."

"No," I said.

"Why not? Don't you trust me?"

"Trust you? I don't even know who you are."

"I'm the same as you, Jack. The same. Just a poor girl who didn't want to be useless. You're hurt, darling. Let me help."

Despite my medicated state, I was beginning to feel increasingly uncomfortable with the situation. Having been stabbed in the back hours previously did nothing to raise my confidence in human nature. Strangely, I felt betrayed, because while I had made love to Cecilia as Coupon, this stranger had made love to me as Cecilia.

And why was she telecommunicating? Why wasn't she at my side?

"Where are you?" I asked.

"In the communications center," she said. "I've got to overwrite the memory of fifteen different systems. Some of them are cryptolocked with your code...with Coupon's code, Jack. I've got to have it."

"I'll clean them out later," I said. "There's time."

"You don't trust me!" she wailed.

"No," I said. "But maybe I will later. Give me time."

Cecilia's image stared at me. For a moment she seemed to have frozen.

"All right," she said. "That's fair. Let's just get through this bloody presentation."

"There's a lot of work ahead of us," I said.

"I'll help you, Jack."

"I need your help...Cecilia."

"I'm Luiza," she said. "Luiza Johnson."

"Luiza."

"Call me Cecilia, though, Ja — Fred. Cecilia. Otherwise we'll have to keep rewriting over the memories. And someday you might slip in front of another person."

"Cecilia."

"Yes, Fred."

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"Frederick."

"Of course. Frederick."

WE MUDDLED THROUGH the presentation. I healed well enough that I was able to attend the necessary meetings in St. Petersburg. At the first opportunity, however, Cecilia and I escaped in the *Sephora*. We set course for the lesser Antilles. By the time we anchored off the Ochos Rios recreational complex, Cecilia's and my relationship had taken its new, more loving form. To all the world, it seemed as if Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Coupon had undergone a marital renaissance.

We grew into a good team. Besides her emulator training, Cecilia refused to talk about her past. For my own part, it was difficult to try to explain who or what a Jack Quimby was or once had been. Our work together seemed the most fruitful topic of conversation. Eventually I came to believe that a romantic relationship is a complex of behaviors and chemistries, with identity having little to do with it. Did it really matter? Men had loved women throughout history, but what man had ever claimed to know them?

Yet I was beginning to trust her enough that I was contemplating sharing Coupon's cryptokey. As luck would have it, I was on the cusp of deciding to do so, the day the message came in from the Taiwanese black arts enterprise.

Unlocking the code with Coupon's cryptokey, I read the following message:

Most excellent Mr. Coupon,

We of Red Dragon Semantic Arts have been honored with your patronage. We regret the tardiness of our delivery, but since the outer message code was irreducible, we had to resort to special actions to obtain the key. Decoding the inner code, of course, relies on your own private key.

We have billed the indicated account by 50 MYen. May we suggest that you exercise the utmost delicacy in your further dealings with Universal Emulators. We look forward to the next opportunity to be of service.

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I tapped in the two large prime numbers which constituted Coupon's private key. The original text then became sense:

——————————— start transmission ———————————

Special Emulator Reichmanf,

Your most recent request to allow Emulator Quimby to relieve you on station is most emphatically denied. The current team in place is highly functional. We will not entertain any more communications on this issue. You will continue to perform your duties as stipulated by your indenture contract, which will not be up for renegotiation for another three years, six months, eleven days.

Find comfort in the knowledge that your private account now totals over 39 trillion yen.

——————————— end transmission ———————————

I studied the message for long minutes, unable to comprehend. Finally, when I did understand, I wondered if Emulator Reichmanf had taken the place of the original Coupon, or had he merely assumed the place of an n-1 generation copy?

And who was I? Nothing about me seemed so important as the fact that I was the only man in the world who held Coupon's private cryptokey. Reichmanf had shared it with me and it had been the death of him.

Out on the sponson, staring at the hypocritical blue face of the tropical ocean, I realized down to my grafted bones who I was.

The bearer of Coupon's cryptokey. In other words, Coupon.

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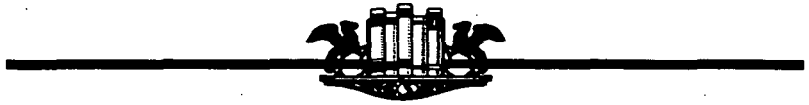

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Girl Goddess #9, by Francesca Lia Block, Joanna Cotler Books/ HarperCollins, 1996, $14.95

ALMOST AS enjoyable as discovering a new favorite author is finding a gem of a story in an unexpected place. For fantasy readers, it can be that perfect fantasy story in what one assumed was a mainstream collection. My own two favorite stories, period, were found in such a way.

One is the title story of Barbara Kingsolver's *Homeland and Other Stories* (Harper & Row, 1989), in which a child is entrusted with the responsibility of remembering her great-grandmother's culture. It's such a pure piece of storytelling that I'm in still in awe of it every time I reread it.

Another appears in a collection that carries what is surely one of the great book titles: Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993). In "Distances" Alexie takes only six pages to capture the horror and pain, the confusion and pathos of the world following a major disaster — something many authors would take an entire novel to tell.

To this worthy pair I can now add "Blue" from Francesca Lia Block's new collection, *Girl Goddess #9*, which adds a new twist to the idea of an imaginary friend as a young girl's sorrow over her mother's death takes on a life of its own and manifests as a small blue creature that comes creeping out of the girl's closet. Adding to the story's poignancy is that the girl's mother was schizophrenic, hearing voices and the like, which naturally makes the young protagonist question her own sanity.

The other eight stories in the book are all excellent as well, full of punky "grrrl" protagonists and the varying degrees of whimsy and pain with which they try to make sense

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out of life, but be forewarned that their stories are strictly mainstream. No less wonderful because of that — Block has a true gift for capturing the contemporary moment and making it appear timeless — but they won't necessarily be every fantasy reader's cup of tea. However, I do recommend that you at least check the book out of your library and read "Blue."

Sowa's Ark; an Enchanted Bestiary by Michael Sowa, Chronicle Books, 1996, $19.95

A few years ago my wife MaryAnn and I were looking through postcards in a small shop in Vancouver when we came across a half-dozen utterly enchanting cards by a German artist and had to buy them all. The images were riveting. Painted in the chiaroscuro style of a Vermeer or Rembrandt, they depicted strange juxtapositions that were at once humorous and thought-provoking:

A miniature pig bathing in a soup bowl.

A rabbit trying on a man's boxer shorts.

Ambulatory vegetables at a small village crossroads.

They are paintings that wake a smile, yes, but they also startle in the same way that a story by James Blaylock or Tim Powers will suddenly make you see the everyday through a lunatic's eyes and question the reality that up to now we've all agreed upon. Combined with the artist's beautiful renderings, *Sowa's Ark* is an endless delight.

The introduction is by Neil Bantock (of *Griffin & Sabine* fame) and provides an excellent entry point. My only complaint with this slender (71pp) and small (9" X 8") volume is that it's too short and the images deserve to be reproduced at a larger size. On the other hand, having them collected here certainly beats trying to track them all down as postcards.

The Horns of Elfland, edited by Ellen Kushner, Delia Sherman & Donald G. Keller, Roc, 1997, $5.99

"Writing about music is like dancing about architecture" is a quote attributed to Frank Zappa.

I had that quote in mind as I began to read this book, planning to drop it somewhere at the beginning of the review and then seeing how successfully the various authors refuted it. However, one of the editors beat me to its use in her story introductions, and even had her counterargument all prepared:

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"Honey, I got [sic] news for you," Ellen Kushner writes. "Writing about anything (except words themselves) is like dancing about architecture."

Well, yes. But music seems to present a particularly thorny problem, especially if the music depends on any sort of specialized knowledge of a certain style. How to get the necessary frisson without bogging the story down in explanatory detail? Of course, that's part of the job of a good writer and, in most cases, these authors pull it off.

My other fear was that the anthology would rely too heavily on the obvious musical genres one finds in fantasy — rock'n'roll and Celtic dance tunes. Once past the first story (which has both), I soon discovered that Kushner and company have managed to call up about as eclectic a mix as you might find on a good college radio station, or on public radio. There's everything from the found music in Jack Womack's "Audience" through to opera (Jane Emerson and Susan Palwick's offerings), sacred harp singing (Delia Sherman), rap (Ray Davis), old-time jazz (beautifully portrayed in John Brunner's "The Drummer and the Skins"), piano recitals (Michael Kandel), and Cajun (Lucy Sussex).

There's even the token deal with the devil story (wouldn't be a music anthology without one). Here it's "Brandy for the Damned" by Roz Kaveney, which handily manages to feel as fresh as it is eloquently written.

Susan Palwick's "Aida in the Park" might have remained my favorite in the collection for a few reasons: I'm not particularly fond of opera, but she made me care about it and not feel too stupid with my ignorance; she presented some of the best reasons for writing fantasy that I've read in a while; and she managed to give the piece both a happy and a sad ending, playing fair all the while. Mind you, Palwick's a gem of a writer, so I wasn't too surprised. One of the nicest touches was how her protagonist kept viewing the ongoing events in terms of fairy tales.

But then — and my bias is showing here, because I'm utterly enamored with her work — I read Terri Windling's "The Color of Angels" and now I can't get the story out of my head. And not simply the story, but the resonance of it.

It's one of the longer offerings in the anthology, easily novella-length, and for those of you who enjoyed her novel *The Wood Wife* (discussed in this column a few

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months ago), you'll appreciate how characters from the novel and novella show up in each, albeit somewhat off-stage.

As the novel does, "The Color of Angels" deals with the creative impulse and the complexities of human relationships, but here the focus is on printmaker Tatiana Ludvik, who is undergoing a crisis of faith in her artistic ability. That, combined with the frustration of how multiple sclerosis is steadily weakening her body, sends Tat from her London studio to a small chapel in the Devon countryside that she had renovated in the days when she was stronger.

Unfortunately, you can't always escape your problems simply by relocating. Between her new neighbor — a Breton sculptor with an uncanny ability to second-guess her — and the mystery that is waking in a circle of standing stones in the hills near the chapel, Tat finds her life getting more complicated, rather than less.

The Devon countryside becomes as much a character here as the Sonoran desert did in *The Wood Wife*, while Windling's narrative skills seem to only grow stronger, particularly in how she balances her lyrical passages with those more firmly rooted in the grittiness of everyday life.

If there are one or two slight stories in *The Horns of Elfland*, there are also more than a few strong and innovative offerings, and Windling's novella alone is worth the price of admission. In other words, don't miss this "concert."

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

DOUGLAS E. WINTER

"The dead only get up and walk in very bad paperback novels."

—*Breakfast at Manchester Morgue* (1974)

THERE'S A framed letter on the wall of my office, written nearly a hundred years ago on the stationery of the Lyceum Theatre. My brother, a historian, found it in a trove of documents concerning the American Civil War. Surely it had been misplaced: the letter was written by Bram Stoker, and his scurrying pen queries his literary agent, Colles, about money and his publisher's terms for the novel being prepared in the wake of *Dracula*. Beyond its confirmation that the writing life is not likely to improve, the letter is painfully ironic. Who remembers the novel that Stoker was writing in 1899? (It was *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902), which Conan Doyle found "admirable" but which, along with so much else that Stoker wrote, is long out of print.)

Who does not doubt that, if Stoker were alive today, his publisher would be encouraging, if not demanding, a sequel to *Dracula*?

The vampire was not Stoker's creation, but *Dracula* has proved such convincing propaganda for "The Un-Dead" (to indulge its original title) that it has found immortality in repetition and imitation while its author has been drained to a marginal memory: even the motion picture *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1995) was marketed by a novelization, written by Fred Saberhagen.

This sorry state of affairs certainly justifies reprint anthologies like *Vampires, Wine & Roses*, edited by John Richard Stephens (Berkley, tpb, 384 pp., $14.00). Along with the similarly conceived *Classic Vampire Stories*, edited by Leslie Shepard (1995), and the superior *Blood & Roses*, edited by Adele Olivia Gladwell and James Havoc (1992), this compilation argues for

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the pervasiveness of the "vampire motif" in world literature; but it draws only an obvious conclusion: "Vampires lend themselves very well as metaphors of society, certain relationships, love, and sex." Although Stephens delivers a handful of rarities, the selections include some obvious stretches (Shakespeare, Eliot) and several evergreens, notably Maupassant's "The Horla" and Stoker's own "Dracula's Guest."

In championing the vampire as literature, Stephens makes academically safe choices — those venerable dead men — and elides the contemporary. There are no offerings less than ten years old save a goofy lyric from Anne Rice, and only four living contributors: Rice is joined by Woody Allen, Ray Bradbury, and Sting (another lyric, from "Moon over Bourbon Street"), who hardly represent the vampire fiction of the past fifty years. The strategy parallels the troubling tendency of certain scholars and fans to read the vampire as somehow representing the elite of the dark fantastic, if not a genre unto itself.

It is worrisome to think that this volume will offer some readers their only exposure to the likes of Hardy and Keats; but the more unsettling truth is that there is an audience, considerable in size, that is capable of experiencing the literature of the dark fantastic (if not literature itself) only through the iconography of the vampire.

That reality is confirmed in an otherwise effective and entertaining novel by Nancy A. Collins, *A Dozen Black Roses* (White Wolf, hc, 238 pp., $21.99).

Collins, one of the fine contemporary writers of vampire fiction whom Stephens neglects, created the prototypical collision of gothic and punk sensibilities in *Sunglasses After Dark* (1989), which introduced her vampiric vampire hunter, Sonja Blue. *A Dozen Black Roses* is clearly a lark: like Sergio Leone and, more recently, Walter Hill, Collins has reinvented Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), this time in a fierce "Deadtown" with Sonja Blue as the Stranger who plays two factions into annihilation. The downside is that Sonja has crossed over into White Wolf's "World of Darkness" — a role-playing game — and while Collins does not compromise her prose or her character, there is an ominous shadow here, which deepens in an appended "glossary" of gaming terms.

A curious homage is offered by Jonathan Aycliffe in *The Lost* (HarperCollins, hc, 166 pp., $16.00),

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a pastiche of Stoker that presumes to trump his classic. The novel staggers beneath its weighty conceit, which includes the use of Stoker's plot and, despite a modern setting, his epistolary structure. With the end of communist rule in Romania, a British schoolteacher lights out for Budapest in search of his heritage: the time-honored mountain castle and its buried secrets. (There is even a gypsy woman who recoils from the sight of the feckless protagonist.) What separates *The Lost* from the usual suspects is Aycliffe's deft prose, which manages to transcend much of the cliché, and a cunning embrace of narrative silence. By declining to explicate his terrors, Aycliffe volleys them into the darker recesses of the reader's imagination and, in his endgame, creates moments of genuine *frisson*.

The Bell Witch: An American Haunting (St. Martin's, hc, 208 pp., $20.95) is not a vampire novel (or, arguably, even a novel), but it concerns the undead and, unlike *The Lost*, uses an archaic structure to great advantage.

"Edited" by novelist Brent Monahan (*The Book of Common Dread*, 1993), *The Bell Witch* is supposedly the eyewitness account of a haunting that occurred in Tennessee during the early 1800s — the only case in American history in which a "spirit" killed a man. Although the manuscript has the patina of authenticity, the text (said to have been prepared only for the author's daughter) is strikingly novelistic by today's standards. Perhaps Monahan revised it thoroughly, or perhaps he should have re-read his Brockden Brown and Poe; but the story is so remarkable and well told that readers may not care. The final pages are especially moving, and offer a potent thesis for what we have come to refer to as poltergeist phenomena.

As *The Bell Witch* reminds us, not everything that rises from the grave is a vampire, and several recent suspense novels have invoked archetypal images of horror to heighten their otherwise "realistic" drama. David Morrell's *Extreme Denial* (Warner, hc, 455 pp., $23.95) features a character who, left for dead in a gun battle, returns as a cloaked and guttural avenger. Even Mickey Spillane's latest, *Black Alley* (Dutton, hc, 234 pp., $23.95), finds hardboiled Mike Hammer on a walk through the valley — make that alley — of the shadow of death. But it is Michael Kimball's compelling *Undone* (Avon, hc, 338 pp., $23.00) that convincingly demonstrates both the futility of thinking

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of horror in generic terms, and the powerful impact that the possibility of the supernatural can bring to "realistic" fiction. Kimball is strikingly adept at crafting suspense out of the expectations that fiction and film have instilled in us. He places his characters (and thus, his readers) into comfortable sequences of events from which those expectations must surely follow — and then he wreaks havoc. In *Undone*, Bobby and Noel Swift are lovers on the lam with a $2 million jackpot waiting at the end of the rainbow — if Bobby can fake his own death and assume a new identity.

After five years of hiding in the bucolic backwater of Gravity, Maine, they make their move, seducing a local funeral director into their plan; but to succeed, Bobby must be buried alive until night, waiting for Noel to dig him up. And waiting, and waiting...

With *'48* (HarperPrism, hc, 272 pp. $22.00), James Herbert delivers another triumphant thriller that blends two-fisted action with the supernatural; it is also his salute to the seminal vampire novel of this generation, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954). The year is 1948, and the place is the dead city known as London. World War Two has ended after Hitler's V-2 missiles, armed with bacteriological weapons, loosed a plague that scourged the planet and left the dying and the immune to wage a new conflict whose spoils are blood. From its opening motorcycle chase through the halls of Buckingham Palace, *'48* glories in the destruction of bureaucratic order and social class, distilling the past fifty years of British history into a microcosmic fantasy that asks: Why did we fight, and who really won? The traditional Herbert outsider — a stranded American pilot — confronts an England slipsliding into blackshirted fascism, but this novel's best moments are its rewritten history: the deathstyles of the rich and famous at the Savoy Hotel; the mysterious fate of the royal family; the lone Luftwaffe bomber that still flies a nightly sortie over the dead city.

A first novel by Del Stone, Jr., *dead heat* (Mojo Press, hc, 187 pp., $24.95), offers a similar post-apocalyptic vision, drawn from the most famous film homage to *I Am Legend*, George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); but Stone shifts the story from a claustrophobic siege to a *Damnation Alley*-style road race. His outsider, Hitch, wears the flesh of the dead, but his mind and spirit remain with the living. Riding a Harley and wielding a

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metallic hook, he roams the highways and byways of America in a series of violent episodes that don't quite add up. The writing is vivid and energetic, and although the essential (and existential) dilemma of Hitch's living death is subsumed in the non-stop action, *dead heat* proves that Stone is a talent worthy of attention.

Two of the season's most important novels find writers who worked explicitly with the iconography of the vampire moving on to more original, and much more satisfying, texts. Todd Grimson's debut novel, *Stainless* (1996), was a stylistic delight that nearly suffocated in its sedulous vampirism. With the aptly titled *Brand New Cherry Flavor* (HarperPrism, hc, 352 pp. $20.00), Grimson fulfills the heady potential of his first novel in a context loosed of any preoccupation with genre. In outline, the plot seems deceptively tired: Lisa Nova, an ambitious and attractive fringe filmmaker, is screwed physically and professionally by a loathsome Hollywood producer. In exacting her vengeance, she enlists the services of a creepy shaman named Boro, and soon learns the timeless lesson about wishes. But *Brand New Cherry Flavor* is no simple take on "The Monkey's Paw"; it is a narrative of remarkable complexity, in which Grimson's inventive prose drives the reader on not simply by its love of words but also by its unabashed love of its characters.

Grimson invests this novel with something sadly lacking in most recent fiction of the undead—a sense that the text, however outlandish or fantastic its trappings, is in some way a mirror of life; that we are not reading for the sake of mere images, but for metaphor and perhaps even metaphysics.

Although Poppy Z. Brite's prodigious talent has armored her against typecasting, she has been identified with things vampiric through her first novel and her "Love in Vein" anthologies. She steps out boldly in her third and best novel to date, *Exquisite Corpse* (Simon & Schuster, hc, 240 pp., $21.00). This extraordinary text is described best (although far too conveniently) as "When Nilsen Met Dahmer." But there is little humor in these pages; instead there is a cold fusion of rhapsody and rage about the so-called pleasures of the flesh, a pursuit of (homo)eroticism to the places where emotion and, indeed, reason — but not the social compact — tell us it must inevitably go. A convicted serial killer, Andrew Compton, escapes prison

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and England for the bars and beautiful boys of New Orleans' French Quarter, where he meets his match, and mate, in the decadent but discreet cannibal Jay Byrne. Their romance — and this is unabashedly a love story — is shocking, sensual, and Swiftian in its satire. Brite's novelistic skills continue to mature, and although *Exquisite Corpse* is not an endearing novel for the closed-minded, or one likely to expand Brite's readership, it is an act of conscience in a time when too many writers are worrying about too many series and sequels.

If there is a single writer with whom Brite's work in *Exquisite Corpse* might be compared, it is Dennis Cooper, whose identification with another false genre (gay fiction) — and, ironically, his disturbing prose — have kept him from the purview of many readers of the dark fantastic. *Horror Hospital Unplugged* (Juno, tpb, 256 pp., $24.95) is a visual adaptation of Cooper's short story "Horror Hospital" (from *Wrong*, 1992) and a useful introduction for the uninitiated. Powered by the antic artwork of Keith Mayerson, this tragicomedy pulls the plug on Trevor Machine, the dazed and confused vocalist for an indy rock-and-roll band who finds and loses love in a world that (as his last name signals) is intent on mechanization: the music industry, the film industry, the gay industry.

Although this world makes spare parts of its Trevor Machines, it is the playground of Lord Horror's "Creep Boys," the rapacious anti-villains of David Britton's *Meng & Ecker*, the only comic book to be banned in England.

Although declared obscene in 1992, and later held "likely to corrupt" and burned (that's right, *burned*) by the authorities in 1995, this astonishing series has risen from the ashes in book form as *The Adventures of Meng & Ecker* (Savoy, hc, 256 pp., £25.00; tpb, £9.99). Edited by Michael Butterworth and featuring the artwork of Kris Guidio, this volume presents several previously published episodes, but more than half of its pages are devoted to welcome new exploits of Britton's surreal killers. This is indeed, as its cover boasts, "The Best Comic Book On Earth." ☙

Douglas E. Winter
Oakton, Virginia
February 1997

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EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

YOU DON'T need to be one of the women who run with wolves to enjoy Pat Murphy's *Nadya* (Tor), but after you finish it, you may want to become one. *Nadya* chronicles the life of a woman werewolf living on the American frontier through the middle of the nineteenth century. Such a simplistic description does little justice to the textured, engaging, and ultimately affecting story, but it should be enough to set you slavering.

Joyce Carol Oates has assembled an interesting collection of stories in *American Gothic Tales* (Plume), with forty-six stories ranging from Washington Irving and Charles Brockden Brown to Shirley Jackson and Sylvia Plath. The introductory essay sets the stage well for the book's social context as a collection of North American fiction. There's a good sampling of recent works from the likes of Peter Straub and Anne Rice, along with some writers you might not expect, such as E. L. Doctorow and Ursula K. Le Guin, as well as stories from these pages by Thomas Ligotti and Nancy Etchemendy. Unfortunately, the copyright credits here are embarrassing, citing John Crowley's 1985 *Omni* story "Snow" as having first appeared in 1993 and in many cases not even listing the year of copyright. Read the stories; skip the credits.

Jack Womack's stories often have a Gothic sensibility, but his novels fit easily in no category. Two of them — *Ambient* and *Elvissey* (Grove Press) — are back in print and well worth reading (and rereading). Womack's other novels chronicling America's descent into the future, *Terraplane* and *Heathern*, are due out later this year. All the books are fascinating and unforgettable.

In recent years, NESFA Press published mammoth retrospective collections of Cordwainer Smith's

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stories and Zenna Henderson's; now they have collected all of C. M. Kornbluth's tales in *His Share of Glory,* almost seven hundred pages of classic SF. If you know Kornbluth only from "The Marching Morons," check this book out immediately, and if you think you've read all of Kornbluth's work, you'll probably be surprised by some of the early material here (but call me a skeptic: I don't believe this copyright page's claim that "No Place to Go" appeared in the May 1841 issue of *Cosmic Stories*).

Michael Blumlein's stories don't date back to the 1840s or even to the 1950s, but his story collection *The Brains of Rats* (Dell) is just now coming out in paperback more than six years after its small-press hardcover publication. The timeliness of "Shed His Grace" is gone, but the fine-edged writing and powerful imagination of such works as "Bestseller" and the title story make this collection well worth reading. And those of you who have read this book already will be pleased to know we have new stories from Mr. Blumlein coming your way soon.

Joe Haldeman's latest story collection, *None So Blind* (Avon), is out in paperback and even if you've managed the unlikely feat of tracking down all of these stories in their original magazine and anthology appearances, you'll want this collection for Haldeman's introductory essay and story notes, which offer great insight into the writer's life and the craft of writing. (Somebody really ought to get Joe to write a book on the subject.)

Speaking of books on writing, two interesting guides came out recently: *Time Travel* by Paul J. Nahin and *Space Travel* by Ben Bova with Anthony R. Lewis (both from Writer's Digest Books). The former delves deeply into the physics of time travel, but it's not hard to follow and this wide view of how writers have approached the paradoxes of time travel is fascinating (although I found it curious that the author overlooked Greg Benford's *Timescape,* even when quoting Benford in regard to tachyons). The book on Space Travel is handier for checking celestial mechanics and practical matters like a ship's payload, but both books are great simply for learning how others have approached these subjects previously.

And finally, but certainly not least, Charles de Lint's new Newford novel is out in hardcover. *Trader* (Tor) takes the old plot of having two characters wake up in

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each other's bodies and rings it through some new changes as a guitar maker suddenly finds himself in the body of a troublesome and homeless young man. De Lint is in fine form here, which is good news for everyone who loves a good tale.

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Mary Kittredge is best known for her series of medical mysteries featuring Edwina Crusoe, which include Kill or Cure *and* Desperate Remedy. *Her previous short fiction has mostly been published in the mystery field—in fact, she received the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for "Father to the Man" in 1986. But an experience she had in an old Vermont farmhouse that was supposed to be vacant inspired this welcome venture into the realm of the fantastic.*

Her House in Order

By Mary Kittredge

THE BABY'S FINGER FELL off this morning while I was bathing her. I had to pretend I didn't notice. I just waited, thinking determinedly of something else, until she slapped, laughing, at the bubbles in the basin, and when her tiny hand emerged from the soapy water, pink and dripping, the finger was back.

I dried the baby and dressed her in a clean, fresh sleeper, gave her a bottle, and put her down for a nap in the big, bright nursery which was one of the reasons we liked this house so much, back when we first looked at it. We had seen, it seemed then, hundreds of houses, each with its fatal flaw: too small, too old, too decrepit, and most frequently of all, too expensive.

This house sat on ten acres of hillside, on the outskirts of a little town in central Vermont. Tiger lilies bloomed by the tool shed, the single front step was a solid slab of granite, and a grape arbor laden with luscious fruit stood in the side yard, near the apple trees and the vegetable garden. The

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house itself was a large, country-farmhouse-style structure; silently we took in the new roof and freshly pointed chimneys, shiny gutters and gleaming paint: white for the clapboards, dark green for the dozens of sets of working wooden shutters adorning the brand-new, double-hung windows. Despite all this, the ad had listed a price that was well within our budget.

Disbelieving, we went in, forcing ourselves not to exclaim over the enormous kitchen. Besides a big butcher-block table and a working woodstove, atop which I could practically see a batch of homemade bread rising, it was equipped with a garbage disposal, automatic icemaker, and double wall ovens, all things we had never had before. The other rooms, too, retained the charm of a real, old-fashioned New England homestead, but with every one of the modern conveniences.

We wandered around the place in a daze, afraid to look at one another in case we should burst out laughing; until now, we had lived crammed into a city apartment, with twin six-year-old sons and a new baby. This house was so big, and so perfect, it didn't seem we could possibly buy it for the listed price. Even the cellar, which my husband assured me did not leak, held a new oil furnace and extra-large electric water heater, along with a washing machine and dryer. Remembering the garden, I thought that in summer I would hang the laundry outside, and carry it back in fragrant armloads drenched with sunshine and the smell of clover, but in winter the cellar would be useful. After a while my husband went up to the attic to see if some awful defect could be hidden there, while I went to talk to the real estate lady.

"Old folks died, settle the estate, they want a quick sale," she said, blowing cigarette smoke out her thin nostrils. She wore a bright red suit and gold jewelry, and her red fingernails drummed the butcher-block impatiently as she glanced at the door and at her wristwatch, again. "So, you think your husband might be interested?"

She stubbed her cigarette angrily into the chipped saucer she had appropriated for the purpose. I wondered why she seemed so anxious to go, then realized that on a sunny Sunday afternoon in August she was probably in a hurry to get back to her own family. I thought about saying that my husband and I would have to discuss it together before coming to any decision, but before I could speak his footsteps came hurrying down the stairs and he burst into the room with a grin on his face.

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"Honey," he said, "we've got to take it. Go have a look at the attic, it'll make a perfect kids' playroom. How much," he asked the real estate lady, "will it take to hold it on deposit?"

Surprised, I hesitated. There were still a dozen questions to be answered about the place, and it wasn't like him to be so impulsive. Annoyed, he glanced up at me from his checkbook.

"Well, go on," he said, and I saw how much he really wanted the house, so I shrugged off my twinge of hurt feelings and went on up the stairs. After all, I wanted it, too; talking it over wouldn't have made any difference. Humming, I let my hand slip easily on the burnished banister; going along the hall, I looked into each bright, spacious bedroom.

The boys would not care for the flowered wallpaper, of course, but it was fine for the baby, and the biggest bedroom had a view of the mountains. All had white, freshly painted woodwork and sparkling cut-glass doorknobs, and polished, wide-plank wooden floors that wanted only hooked or crocheted rugs, never any wall-to-wall carpet.

Home, I thought tentatively and then more certainly, feeling a fragile bubble of happiness begin growing as I opened the door at the end of the hall. The door was perfectly proportioned but smaller than the others, as if it had been cut for a little person; somehow it made me think of the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland. Mine, I thought, starting up the steep, narrow set of enclosed steps leading to the attic. From above me came a faint, persistent buzzing, as if a bee had become trapped and was trying to get out at one of the windowpanes.

The attic was a large, unfinished space with a low, slanted ceiling and chimneys rising through it at intervals. Dormered windows pierced the roof along both sides, and fanlights were set in at either end, giving the place the odd, unpleasant effect of a many-eyed insect, looking inward. Crossing the plank floor, I noticed that whoever had done such a wonderful job downstairs had not bothered much about cleaning up here; dusty old clipping books, discolored file folders, and even a few antique-looking photograph albums lay in a heap by one of the chimneys, and the rafters were festooned with cobwebs.

Surely it was a trick of the grayish light seeping from the windows that made the cobwebs shift stealthily, as if within them masses of spiders might be readying to drop. The stale, motionless air grew loud with the

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buzzing of bees, and my head filled with a smell like burning leaves. Turning, I glimpsed a raggedy remnant of old curtain in a window where, surely, no curtain had hung a moment before. A humped, indistinct shape moved slyly within its folds, then dropped with a dusty thump to scuttle across the floor at me.

Clamping my lips together, for I knew somehow what the loose shape wanted to do to me, I scrambled to the steps and stumbled down them, hearing the rustle of cloth coming quickly and confidently up behind me, to the edge of the attic floor. Then, as suddenly as an indrawn breath, it was gone, and I stood terrified at the foot of the narrow stairwell, outside the small but perfectly proportioned attic door.

Shocked and confused — could it have really happened? — and feeling as if I must have been gone for hours, I made my way back downstairs to the kitchen of the old house, where my husband and the real estate lady were shaking hands on the deal.

"Well," my husband said happily, tucking away his checkbook, "we've got ourselves a home."

I looked at the real estate lady, who was folding the check into her briefcase, and at my husband, who frowned as he eyed me closely.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

The real estate lady stubbed out her cigarette. "The deposit is non-refundable," she said, snapping her briefcase shut with a final-sounding click.

"Well, of course it is," my husband replied heartily, putting his arm around me. "We wouldn't have it any other way, would we, honey?"

I could have stopped it all, of course, right then and there: demanded the check back, torn it up, and dealt with my husband's wrath and disbelief later. I almost did, but as I opened my mouth to protest, something stopped me.

Maybe it was the look in my husband's eyes, silently asking me please to go along with him on this. Whatever had upset me couldn't possibly be as significant as the kind of deal we were getting, here, and it was the sort of house he had always dreamed of having, only he'd never dreamed of being able to afford it.

Maybe it was that, combined with my desire to believe there could not really be anything such as I had experienced, or thought I had

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experienced, in the attic. Not here, not anywhere. Or maybe it was something worse that made me return my husband's embrace with a reassuring hug.

Through the window, I could see out into the garden, where somebody must have strung a clothesline; for a moment I thought I glimpsed flapping cloth. A dish towel or cleaning rag, probably, faded the color of old bones. Or nothing; when I looked again it was gone. "Of course," I said. "Of course we're going to buy this house."

The thing in the attic seemed suddenly no more than an illusion, a moment's dizziness brought on by fatigue and by the stale, dusty air in the long-enclosed space, and if I had any questions about the wisdom of my words, there were answers enough in my husband's smile, or anyway they were enough at the time.

In September we moved into the house, spreading our few sticks of furniture among the enormous rooms. I went to tag sales and church bazaars, which the women around here seemed to put on every weekend, and bought things that looked as if they belonged in a house like this: chenille bedspreads, braided rugs, chairs and tables that settled comfortably into their places the minute I brought them home, as if they had always been there. I found a piano for a ridiculously low sum, had a man come and tune it, and the boys began taking lessons; in the evenings, sometimes, I played it, too, discovering that I had a talent for picking out the chords of the sad, old love songs on the antique sheet music my husband presented to me one day, saying he had found it in an abandoned trunk out in the tool shed.

Meanwhile he began his new job in Montpelier, starting off each morning very early in the car, and often not returning until late at night. The boys attended first grade, rollicking down the driveway to climb onto the big yellow schoolbus while I stood watching from the kitchen window, holding the baby and helping her to wave her little hand, teaching her to say good-bye. After that, I dressed her and we began our day; I had no reason to go up into the attic that autumn, and so I did not.

In November we bought another car so that I could drive to town for small items that I needed from the market. The boys, too, needed to be driven places: to the houses of friends, to movies in town, or to skate on the pond behind the school, after which one of the other mothers might

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keep them until after dinner. As winter came on, I found myself alone in the house more often, and with darkness closing in earlier. The baby, in one of the quick changes of habit she seemed prone to, now, as if trying them on to see which ones might suit her permanently, began napping for long stretches in the late afternoons, sleeping so quietly that if I had not known she was upstairs, I might have thought I had imagined her, that she was just someone I dreamed up.

Her naps did give me a great deal of uninterrupted time in which to finish my chores, though, so that one afternoon in the early part of December, it finally happened: I had nothing to do. The laundry was ironed, folded, and put away, a stewpot bubbled atop the woodstove, which I had taken to lighting right after lunch, mostly to keep me company, and the house was completely clean from bottom to top, except of course for all those dusty clipping books, stained file folders, and crumbling photograph albums that I had seen lying up in the attic.

It occurred to me that I could send the boys up to get them, but then I remembered they wouldn't be home until the next day; there was a sleep-over for the first-grade boys, at the house of one of them whose mother was, apparently, a canonized saint. And I certainly couldn't ask my husband, who would be sure to say that the items weren't hurting anything where they were, so why not leave them alone, but if I really wanted them I should feel free to fetch them; he is a dear man, my husband, but when it comes to unnecessary chores he prefers the ones he has thought up for himself.

What I could do, of course, was forget the whole notion, but the idea of that made me feel angry; it was, after all, my house, and I suddenly did not see the point of owning a house at all, if I was not to be allowed into the attic. So in the end I did go up there, armed with the only weapon I had: a can of bug spray. I don't know why I thought it might do anything to stop the attack of a homicidal dish rag; still, I felt much better holding it as I confronted the small, white door at the end of the upstairs hallway.

After a moment I reached out and unlatched the lock, which my husband had placed up high where the boys could not reach it; against his expectations, they did not like to play in the attic, preferring their bedrooms or the first-floor spare room we had turned into a playroom for them. So my husband had taken to storing things up there that we did not

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want the boys getting into: tools, mostly, including some old but perfectly good ones he had found forgotten in the cellar, under a tarp.

I turned the knob and opened the door, noticing how smoothly and silently the door hinges worked despite their not being used often, and started up the stairs. Halfway up I paused, holding my breath for the buzzing of bees or the flop of fabric humping itself across the floor at me, but I heard nothing, only the baby whimpering once in the room below before going back to sleep.

Bluish winter light fell slantingly through the windows; it was cold outside, getting ready to snow. The cobwebs were thinner than I remembered, and paler gray. Tiptoeing so as not to wake the baby, I hurried across the attic and gathered up the clipping books, files, and tattered photograph albums, wrinkling my nose at the smell of dust.

Glancing up, for an instant I thought I saw a face pushed to one of the windows, its features mashed in an obscene leer, but when I forced myself to look again it was only a shriveled leaf plastered damply to the glass, blowing off as I watched in fright and then in foolish relief.

Silly. There was nothing up here, after all. Only when I reached the steps and turned to look back at the large, silent attic did I see, in addition to my own footprints, a disordered trail in the floor's thick carpet of dust, as if a handkerchief had been dragged through it. Calmly, I went on down the stairs, exited the stairwell, and closed the door behind me, perfectly aware that the trail in the dust had not been there when I went up, a few minutes earlier. Then from the baby's room I heard a tiny, gagging cough, and I dropped everything and ran to her.

Later, I decided that something had upset her stomach. She was quiet, didn't want to eat much, and refused the bottle I offered her when I put her down for the night. Still, she slept peacefully enough; I left her door open so that I could hear her in case she cried, but she didn't make a peep. When I was sure she was settled, I opened the first clipping book.

It turned out to be a book of family souvenirs: children's report cards, a baby's hair ribbons, postcards from the summer camp two little boys had attended, with here and there a few old deckle-edged snapshots: blurry-faced people in black and white, standing in front of the house or blowing out birthday candles. For a moment I wondered what had happened to them all, but the file folder I opened next answered that question only too well.

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Yellowed newspaper clippings detailed the discovery of a local woman, alone in the house, surrounded by the butchered bodies of her husband and three children. Neighbors had noticed the absence of smoke from the chimneys, which in those days meant the house was going unheated, and cows bawling untended in the pasture, an unimaginable lapse from the family's routine unless something was seriously amiss. Consulting among themselves, the neighbors broke in and found out what the matter was.

Witnesses said the woman confronted them with a bloody axe, but when she saw they were not about to be driven away, she cut her own throat with it, and died before anything could be done. No motive for the tragedy was known, but friends said the woman had recently stopped attending church, and had been acting "peculiar." A trustee was appointed to care for the house, sell off the animals and land, and settle the family's affairs, there being no surviving relatives.

Thoughtfully, I paged through more of the brittle old clippings until I found one that bore a date, forty years earlier; perhaps the trustee had collected them. Decent land was easier to come by then than now, and the parcel the house stood on was not large, but ten acres with a dwelling and outbuildings should have found a buyer quickly, all else being equal.

Which of course it was not. Stacking the file folders and clipping books beside my chair, I got up and began turning lights out, leaving on one in the kitchen for my husband to see by, when he came home. The real estate lady had said that old folks died, implying that someone had been living here until recently, but now I felt sure she had lied, knowing that by the time we learned the truth it would be too late.

The real estate company had probably picked the place up from the town for a fraction of the back taxes, and plowed a lot of improvements into it hoping to make a killing, but people around here had long memories and nobody local would have wanted the property at any price. Climbing the stairs to bed, I knew why the house had been, in the end, so ridiculously inexpensive.

It had to be, to attract an out-of-town family who might buy it without bothering to learn its history: that it was the site of a bloody, unexplained multiple murder topped off by a violent suicide, and that it had stood alone, unoccupied by any living person, since the day they carried the bodies out.

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Later that night when my husband came home and crawled into bed beside me, his body was cold as ice. I had let the stove go out, and forgotten to turn up the thermostat; padding down the hall to adjust it and to check on the baby, I resolved to wake him and tell him what I had learned. It was too much; I did not want to know it alone. But when I reached the baby's room, I found her shivering, her blanket fallen somehow between the slats of her crib. Retrieving it from the floor, I saw by the glow of her night-light that it was covered with dust, mingled with dark fibers from some fabric I could not identify.

I carried the baby back into bed with me, deciding not to wake my husband after all. In the darkness I lay awake cradling her, listening to the distant rumble of the oil furnace, the tinkle of hot water in the heating pipes. That morning I had vaccuumed the whole upstairs, paying special attention to the baby's room. There should not have been any fibers on the floor.

The next day was Saturday, and I woke late to the smell of coffee. My husband had taken the baby downstairs, fed her, and set her in her playpen. When she saw me, her face split open in a toothless grin, and I thought about what I would do to protect her. But this idea made me uncomfortable, somehow, and I turned away, carrying my coffee into the living room where I found my husband paging through the photograph album I had brought down from the attic. The file folders and clipping book were nowhere in sight.

"How did you do it?" He looked up with a pleased, puzzled smile.

"Do what?" Around us, the room seemed snug and safe. He was sitting on the maroon horsehair sofa, its arms and back lacy with the tatted antimacassars I'd found for it at a rummage sale. The mantel clock I'd bought at an auction ticked comfortably, its glass front displaying a painted scene of the Connecticut valley, and the pale maple of the spindleback rocker shone like old gold against the jewel colors of the braided rug.

"Slyboots," my husband said admiringly; it was the name he called me when I had done some admirable thing, and presented it as a *fait accompli*. "Come on," he said, "you can't pretend this wasn't on purpose."

I knew what he meant; I had noticed it the night before, not wanting

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to understand. The piecemeal items of furniture I had collected, an end table here and a footstool there, a box of old draperies sold out of somebody's garage — all of them had settled in with the smug harmony of old friends coming together after a long separation.

"I don't know how you did it," my husband marveled, "finding this stuff. Honey, you're a genius."

Putting his arm around my waist, he drew me down, keeping his other finger pressed to the edge of one of the snapshots, to mark his place in the book. In the picture, a man relaxed in a spindleback rocker, while across from him bulked a dark-colored horsehair sofa, its back and arms decorated with antimacassars, and on the mantel stood an old clock with a painted scene of the Connecticut valley barely visible on its faceplate.

"It's just like before," my husband said, and it was, too, right down to the occupants. All at once it hit me that other people must have inspected this house, and even considered buying it, before we did. Unsuitable families, perhaps: too many children, or not enough boys. Possibly they lacked a baby girl.

From the hall came a whispery rustle like the sound of a dust-mop being pushed along the floor. I got up quickly, just as the baby let out a startled yell. By the time I reached her, she lay on her back, howling and red-faced, her bottle hurled halfway across the room.

"Hey, that kid's got a good arm on her," my husband joked, picking the bottle up off the floor and brushing the dust from it, and I whirled on him, meaning to blurt out all that I needed to say, but before I could utter a word, his nose fell off.

I wanted to scream, to run out of the house and keep running through the clean, white snow that had fallen overnight, but I couldn't because I was barefoot and still in my pajamas, and the baby was only wearing a flannel jumpsuit, and on top of that a car pulled into the driveway: it was the boys, arriving home.

The baby drew a shuddering breath and began shrieking. The kitchen door slammed and the boys ran in, clamoring for their lunch. I smiled welcomingly at them so as not to have to look at my husband, and if possible to distract their attention from him, but they made a beeline for him anyway and flung themselves at him, each boy clinging to one of his legs.

"Here," my husband said, putting the nipple of the baby's bottle into

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his mouth to clean it, then handing the bottle to me, and when I looked up at his face again, his nose was back.

Hacked to pieces, said a still, small voice in my head. *She took an axe and hacked them to pieces.* Suddenly and without at all wanting to I remembered the other thing that I had seen in the attic, leaning against one of the chimneys.

With an axe, the voice repeated maliciously. *With an axe.*

Shakily I handed the baby to my husband and went upstairs to dress, thinking rather wildly about how difficult it must have been, cleaning up after a thing like that. Maybe it was what had driven her to commit the final act: the hopelessness, as she gazed around at the spattered walls, smeared floors and dripping woodwork, of ever managing to put things right again, after what she had already done.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, pulling on my socks, I looked again at the fresh, clean flowered wallpaper someone had put up in the bedroom not long ago. I knew clearly, if I pulled a strip of it down, what I would find beneath. I knew what they had done all those years ago after they broke in and found that wretched woman in the instant before she cut her own throat.

And I knew, or thought I knew, what happened after that: They had carried the bodies out, all the bits of them that they could find, and then they had locked the house up, leaving it to its own devices so that over time, as the stains sank deeply into its porous old wood, carrying with them, perhaps, some memory or reverberation of the terrible things that had happened in its rooms, and without any new tenants to impose sanity upon it, to restore order by the sheer, ongoing ordinariness of their lives, the house had produced a tenant of its own.

I finished tying my shoes and went down to the kitchen where my husband was making peanut-butter sandwiches, cutting them with a large, sharp knife. I averted my eyes as he brandished it playfully, flourishing it while the boys watched, goggle-eyed, and poured myself another cup of coffee. Then I sat down at the butcher-block island, on one of the old wooden stools I'd bought at a flea market along the highway not far from our town.

The boys began devouring their sandwiches. Working happily, my husband carved breast of turkey, slivered pickles like stubby fingers, tore

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lettuce from the head. He had already bought himself a whetstone and a leather strop, planning, he said, to get those tools back in shape over the winter. From the dining room where we had put her playpen, the baby giggled.

"She's being good," said my husband through a mouthful of his sandwich, glancing at the ceiling.

"What?" For practice, he had sharpened a hatchet. I could see it through the kitchen window from where I sat, its wicked-looking edge half-buried in the chopping block by the stovewood pile.

Chewing, he angled his head once more at the ceiling. "The baby. I put her upstairs for a nap while you were dressing. She's being good."

"Oh." I sipped my coffee, thinking that the other woman, the one who had lived here before, had arranged things just the way she liked them; you could see from the snapshots that she kept everything in the house just so. And it was hard, once you had things all organized to suit yourself, to allow anyone to change them. In the pantry, something like a dustcloth or a rag used to polish silver fluttered coyly into view and vanished.

"God, I love it here," my husband said, popping the last bite of his sandwich into his mouth. The boys, too, had nearly finished their lunches.

"I know you do," I replied. "You know, though..."

Here I paused for another sip of coffee, as if an idea were only beginning to occur to me. My husband watched with an alert look of apprehension growing in his eyes.

"We could sell this house and buy a different one," I said. "One we would like even more, maybe even with a swimming pool to use in summer. You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?"

He didn't answer, reaching for the knife he had used to cut the boys' sandwiches. He laid the knife in front of him, frowning at it as if he could not quite remember what it was for. Just then I noticed that the boys' ears had fallen off. Lying in pairs on each boy's plate, the ears resembled servings of strange vegetables.

"Or," I ventured faintly, placatingly, "maybe not."

When I looked back, the boys' ears had returned. My husband took the big, sharp knife to the sink, cleaned it, and put it away, and a little while later I heard the three of them laughing together, playing outside in the snow. None of them had noticed anything wrong.

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That was three months ago, and for a while I thought I had gotten a handle on it all. To go on living here forever, never even thinking of leaving, seemed when you came down to it really rather a small price to pay, especially since no one but me ever perceives anything out of the ordinary, and until now nothing has happened to the baby; whatever is in the house with us seemed to sense, after the first few small incidents which I considered experimental, a sort of ghostly testing of limits, that I would not tolerate anything that harmed or frightened her.

Lately, though, the rules are becoming more stringent. In February, for instance, when the snow was so deep and the days were so cold that I hated even to put my face outdoors, I thought about a vacation: somewhere sunny and warm, with palm trees, for a week. I didn't think it was so much to ask, but that evening the boys' toes fell off, skittering around their bedroom floor like wind-up toys until I thought I would lose my mind, and later that night my husband's face fell into the book he was reading, so that until just before he left for work the next morning, the whole front of his head resembled an anatomy chart.

So I have been thinking again about the woman who lived here all those years ago, wondering if the newspaper stories had it right, absolutely right and complete. Before she stopped going to church services, did she give up card parties and parent-teacher conferences, pot luck suppers and Ladies' Auxiliary meetings? They found her in the house with an axe in her hands, and her family had been taken to pieces, but in view of recent events I can't help wondering if the connnection is as direct as everyone assumed.

As I assumed, believing her somehow responsible for the things that are happening to me now. But perhaps I have fallen into the classic trap of blaming the victim, mistaking effect for cause. I suspect that I have, and into another trap, too.

This morning when the baby's finger fell off, it came back, but a tiny drop of blood appeared where the stub had been, red as a warning flag, and later when I emptied her bath basin into the sink, the water swirled pink on its way down.

I'd been thinking about a trip to the store.

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Mary Rosenblum is the prolific author of Chimera, The Stone Garden, The Drylands, *and numerous stories, many of which were collected in* Synthesis & Other Virtual Realities. *She's best known for her science fiction, but here she gives us a fantastic look at someone who really deserves a second chance.*

Afterimage

By Mary Rosenblum

I'M WALKING DOWN THE street, and I'm *wet*. Rain is running down my face, and my T-shirt is sticking to me. Even my underwear is wet, and I think stupid — you're gonna get there looking like you drowned. And then I think...

...get where?

And I don't know. I don't know where I'm going, and it's like a black hole inside my skull. I stop — forget the rain — because I'm scared. Because it's like the old days, only then I used to let the blackness in with a needle.

I didn't do a shot. I mean, I think about it sometimes, you know? Like when you wake up and you figure there's got to be a reason you're alive, but no matter how hard you try, you can't come up with one? Nothing that really matters anyway. I think about it then. Yeah. But I didn't do one.

Daniel would kill me.

I recognize the sub shop on the corner, and I know where I am anyway.

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I'm either on my way to Daniel's place, or to see Hammer and Keri. At the corner, my feet take me left, away from the river, toward Hammer's. And that tells you right there that I'm not really sure I didn't do something. When I climb up the stairs to Hammer's loft I have to pound on the door, because his bass is shaking the whole building. Which doesn't matter because the building is empty, and Hammer's only there because the owner likes the band and lets him live rent-free as the official caretaker.

Dicey finally yanks the door open. "Hey, Ian," he says and backs off giggling. He's got a half empty bottle of tequila in his hand, and he's making faces at me. Which is normal for Dicey. He's nuts. Hammer only puts up with him 'cause he does the drums like a slumming angel. Or the devil. "Hey, Hammer," I say.

Hammer's stroking these dark chords out of his bass, and he doesn't look up. The notes make me shiver. There's an old lantern burning on the coffee table — something Keri found in a junk store — and that's all the light there is. Which means the place is full of shadows and I think they're kind of moving with the music. Hey, you can't *not* move when Hammer plays.

"So it's all a joke, huh?" Dicey flops down on the cushions that are about the only furniture in the place. "Heaven, hell, all that stuff. It's all shit, huh? You just keep on keepin' on." He sucks at his bottle again. "Jeeze, what a joke."

"What's up?" I say to Hammer, ignoring him. Something's wrong. Weirdness is crawling up and down my spine and I wonder what happened that I don't remember. "Where's Keri?"

"She left." He doesn't look up from that blood red bass of his. The chords change, hitting me like big hands now, shoving me toward the door. I stumble over a cushion. "What's wrong man?" I say, really scared now. "What'd I do?"

"Ask Keri," Dicey snickers. He's sprawled on his back, the tequila bottle balanced on his skinny chest. "Hey," he says as I open the door. "I want to know what it's like."

"What about Keri?" I'm asking Hammer, but the music is a wall between me and him, and he doesn't hear me. "What's *what* like?" I say to Dicey.

"Being dead." He swigs from the bottle and cheap tequila dribbles from the corners of his mouth. "What's it like being dead, man?"

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I slam the door behind me, and I wonder if this is a dream, because nothing makes sense right now. I look at my arms under the one bulb that still works in the fancy ceiling fixture. The old tracks are there — knotted strings counting off a bunch of days I don't remember all that well. Heaven, sometimes. Hell the rest of the time. Not much in between. The scars are white and old. Nothing fresh. I didn't do it long enough that I was shooting anywhere else, so...I didn't do a shot.

Hammer's music comes after me through the door, dark and angry like claws at my back, so that I run down the stairs to the street. No wonder they're so hot — with an album out already. Hammer can hurt you with that music, man.

I go to Daniel's.

I guess I always go to Daniel. Sometimes — in the bad days — I crawled. He's doing a degree in architecture because he says you can achieve God in a building. I wouldn't know.

The stoplights are bleeding into the empty puddled streets, and I'm shivering hard by the time I get to Daniel's place. He lives over this storefront down by the railyard and the river. This old guy — Chinese I guess — has a shop where he sells herbs and paints scrolls for people. If you don't have a key, you got to pound on the front door, and the old guy wakes up, cause he sleeps in his shop. So I always go up the fire escape.

I make a hell of a racket going up, but Daniel's light is on and I don't really care. Hammer's angry music is chasing me like a bunch of ugly crows, and I still can't remember, and I'm really spooked. I clatter up onto the landing outside his window. It's open. The curtains are wet and water's dripping in onto the floor because it's still raining. Daniel's asleep at the huge old dining room table that is most of his furniture. And there's a vodka bottle by his elbow. Mostly empty. And the hair stands up on my neck because Daniel doesn't drink. Not even beer. Bad history, I guess. His dad was a drunk. He doesn't talk about it much.

Dead, Dicey's voice whispers in my ear and I realize I've been hearing it all the way over here, backed by Hammer's bass line. I climb through the window and Daniel wakes up. He stares at me for a second, his face all blurry with booze and sleep. Then he gets up and his chair falls over. "You're dead," he says. And then he passes out.

It's so fast, I almost don't catch him. But I do, all off balance, and my

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feet slip on the wet floor and I crack my head on the edge of the table on my way down, and all my muscles go loose. So I land flat with the wind knocked out of me, and Daniel like a thousand-pound weight on my chest. He twitches and after a minute gets off, but I'm too busy trying to breathe to care. My head hurts like a son of a bitch.

"Ian?" His voice sounds thick and weird.

And I should be scared, because Daniel isn't Dicey, but my head hurts too much to be anything but mad, and when I touch the place where I banged the table, I feel sticky blood. "Do I sound dead?" I sit up and shove my bloody fingers under his nose. "Do I look dead? Do I look like I just dug myself out of a fucking grave?"

"I don't know." He looks like he's going to pass out again. "I watched them...shovel dirt onto your coffin, man. One day you're here. Then you're just...gone. A stupid hit and run in front of a Seven Eleven. After you got clean and everything." He looks away, up at the bottle on the table. "You used to tell me that nothing really mattered. I guess you were right."

"Stop it." He's really scaring me, now. "You sound like me." I try to make it a joke, but shivers are running up and down my spine. Because I remember something — a car — shiny red paint and sun on glass. "You used to kick my butt when I talked like that."

"You're really here?" Daniel starts to touch me, then pulls his hand away.

I grab his shoulders and shake him. "Yeah, I'm here. Snap out of it, man." I shake him again, hard. Like he used to shake me when I was trying to get off the needle and thought I couldn't do it anymore. "You hear me? Whatever's going on, I'm right here, and if I'm dead, nobody told me." But I'm looking into his eyes, and I'm seeing it there — that yeah, he watched them bury me. And it comes back in bits like broken glass on the sidewalk — car hood, windshield, all coming too fast. I can almost see the face behind the sunbright glass, and...I remember how it felt — the impact. No pain, but it was like I could feel my self getting knocked right out of my body. My soul, maybe, if you want to call it that. Me, anyway.

"You remember," Daniel says softly.

"Yeah." The word comes out like a sigh. I let go of him and stare down at the white rosary of old dead days on my forearms. "Sort of." The car,

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nothing after. "How long?" I ask and I hear the tremble in my voice. Because that black hole is there inside my head and I'm teetering on the brink.

"Two weeks. Nobody but us came to the funeral. You really don't have any family, do you? You know, you don't even smell bad." Daniel's laugh is shaky and I can smell booze on his breath.

"No, I don't have any family." Not anymore. "So I'm a ghost." A ghost that bleeds. "Why?" The word comes out a whisper.

"The world's full of ghosts." Daniel gets up and goes over to pick up the vodka bottle. "Just look out at the street. I see too many of them. That's why my old man started drinking. The ghosts. They followed him back from Vietnam. You can make them go away if you drink enough." His lips pull back from his teeth and he throws the bottle through the window. A moment later glass tinkles in the alley.

I touch the cut on my scalp again, and it's not there — the cut I mean. Although drying blood still sticks my hair into clumps. I shiver. And for the first time it hits me — that I'm...different.

I really am a ghost.

"There's got to be a reason. I'm back here to do something, Daniel. Avenge somebody. Save somebody." And I feel it like a shot — all warm and bright, running through my veins. "I know it," I say softly.

He touches me finally — hands light on my shoulders. "Yeah," he says. "Maybe you're right."

"I am." The words come out a whisper, and I think suddenly that I've just said a prayer — the first one I can ever remember saying. And I'm shivering again, because Daniel's place is always cold, and he doesn't say anything, just goes and gets the blanket off the futon he uses as a bed. And he wraps it around my shoulders and just stands there real close, looking at the blood in my hair where the cut healed up so fast. And I think maybe he's crying, but he's got his head turned so I can't really be sure.

Then somebody knocks on the door, hard and sharp. Daniel jumps and I jump and we look at each other. "Your spirit guide," Daniel says. And he laughs, but it's a nervous scratchy sound like fingernails on a blackboard. Whoever it is knocks again, and Daniel is looking at me like I should answer it, but I can't move. It hits me — that I don't know the rules. If there are any. Anything could be out there on the other side of that flimsy door.

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Daniel gives me this look and goes over to open it. "Wait," I say, but it's too late.

"My God." Keri is standing there, with her hair all tangled like she just jumped out of bed. "He wasn't kidding. Ian..." And then she throws herself at me so that I have to put my arms around her, and she's babbling in my ear about the car and saying thank you over and over, and she's crying, too.

And Daniel is leaning against the door watching, and it hits me suddenly that I've never seen him look so sad. And for a minute I think I hear an echo of Hammer's dark chords, but that's just me remembering, because there's no way you could hear him all the way over here, no matter how loud he cranked that killer amp of his. "Keri, hang on." I push her gently away. "Take it easy, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure, Ian." She sniffs and wipes her face on her sleeve.

She's wearing a too-large T-shirt over sweatpants, and I guess she just did get out of bed. Raindrops sparkle like diamonds in her dark auburn hair but she's barely damp, although rain is still pounding on Daniel's window. Even the rain is nice to her, I think. "Who told you I was here?" I ask her.

"Dicey called me. Ian..." She reaches for my hand. "Thank you," she whispers. "I couldn't...live with myself after. Because it was my fault. Why...how are you *here*?"

Her fingers are twined with mine and I catch a whiff of her scent, and I get dizzy. And the car is roaring down the street like an attacking shark, and she stands there, just beyond the parked cars that hide her, frozen in place, like a deer caught in the headlights of a midnight truck, frozen even when I scream at her to watch out... "I ran into you at the store." I swallow, remembering that terrible impact. "You bought eggs." They had fallen in slow motion — bright white grenades spilling out of the carton, exploding into flowers of yellow yolk on the gray pavement as I dove for her... "You and Hammer...?" My tongue feels thick and clumsy. "You moved out?"

"He was a jerk." She flushes and looks away. "He said.... He was wrong! And you saved my life." She trembles briefly. "Ian, how can you be...back?"

"We were just asking ourselves that question." Daniel's tone is flip and bitter. "Got any suggestions?"

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"No," she whispers.

She won't let go of my hand. I feel really strange, because Keri is one of those people who are kind of larger than life, you know? Like Hammer. Only with her it's not music. It's not beauty either. It's like everything works when you're around Keri — like the rain wouldn't have soaked me either, if I'd been out there with her. And there's no way ever that this lady could be interested in me. She and Hammer were perfect, man. A pair.

"You know who might know about this?" She's looking at Daniel now. "Dicey."

"That weirdo?" I laugh.

"Yeah, he might." Daniel is frowning. "I don't know, though." He shakes his head. "He bothers me."

"I know. I wish Hammer hadn't let him into the band." She's got this stubborn look on her face. "But you want to know, right?" She looks up into my face, still pale and worried.

"Yeah." I want to know what I'm supposed to do. This time I reach for her hand, and she smiles.

"They're playing Luna Two tomorrow night," she says. "We could go talk to Dicey then."

I almost tell her that Dicey is over at Hammer's, but he's probably passed out drunk by now. And she probably doesn't want to go back there.

That's not the whole reason. That music scared me.

Keri's looking over my shoulder and I turn around to see what she's staring at. It's getting light out. Dawn. And she looks at me and smiles and her face lights up. "What? You thought I was gonna disappear in the daytime?" I laugh, but I shiver a little, too. Because like I said, I don't know the rules. And I yawn, because all of a sudden I'm incredibly tired.

"Okay." She laughs. "I'll take the hint and let you get some sleep." She looks at Daniel, her smile fading. "I'll come by this afternoon, okay?"

He shrugs and lets her out.

"What's eating you?" I say as he locks the door. "You act like you're pissed at Keri."

"*You're* eating me." He stomps over and flops down onto his futon. "Hey, you're walking around without even a damn bruise, and Keri is coming on to you, and everything's fine, huh?" He glares up from beneath the black fringe of his bangs. "Something's really wrong here, you know?"

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"I know." I sit down beside him, more tired than I've ever been in my life. "I guess I'm just trying not to think about it — what this means." I touch my still-wet jeans. "I mean...this can't really be happening, but it is." And it hits me again — that bright warm shot-feeling. "This is my chance, Daniel — my chance to mean something in this shitty world. This is *it*."

Daniel puts his arm across my shoulders — hesitant, like he expects me to shrug him off. "There's a lot of power in the world." He's still staring at the wall. "Don't you feel it when you walk down the street, or walk into a crowded room? It's like currents in the air — warm, or cold. Sometimes freezing. Sometimes...ugly."

And I shiver, because he's looking into the air like he's seeing stuff I can't. "Hammer's powerful," I say, and think about the bass chords shoving me out the door.

"Yeah." Daniel nods. "And Keri, too, in a different way." He frowns. "You know, when you save somebody's life, you kind of own it. That's a lot of responsibility." He's looking at me sideways, frowning. "I wouldn't want it."

He's talking about Keri. "I don't own her," I say. "What about Dicey? He's such a loser."

"Maybe he just acts like a loser." Daniel crosses his arms on his raised knees, and leans his head on them. "I feel like shit," he mumbles.

"You're hung over." I look at the empty table and something hits me. "Where are all your books — for your classes, I mean?"

"I took 'em down to the bookstore. They pay for used textbooks." He's speaking so softly that I can barely hear him.

"You quit?" I grab him by the shoulder. "You can't quit. It really mattered to you."

"Not anymore." He doesn't lift his head. "Why look for God in a bunch of steel and concrete? Why bother?" He dips his shoulder to shrug off my hand. "I've got to get some sleep before Keri shows up again."

He stretches out on the futon and I drape the quilt over him. He's asleep in about two seconds, snoring a little. I'm not sleepy. I'm not cold anymore either. My jeans are still damp, but my T-shirt has mostly dried. I borrow Daniel's comb and I make faces at myself in his bathroom mirror. I look the same. I don't know if I feel the same or not. I pick up Daniel's

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razor and touch the thin steel blade with my fingertip. Then I put it away and go out.

The little old Chinese man is up already, whisking dust off stacks of china bowls and tea cups with a duster that looks like a rooster's tail. He stares at me as I go past, like he's heard everything we said. I can almost feel him looking as I let myself out, and I wonder if he's one of Daniel's powerful people. Then I'm out the door and into the early morning streets.

I'm not tired, and I'm not hungry. I go downtown, where the streets are full of hurrying men and women wearing business suits and busy faces. They don't look at me, or if they do, they look away fast, figuring I'm going to hassle them for spare change or something. Sometimes, I brush close enough to feel cloth or get bumped by a swinging briefcase full of appointment calendars and important papers. Once I get yelled at by a guy delivering boxes of cut flowers to a florist shop because I'm in the way.

And I'm dead, and maybe they don't know it, but I do. I'm not really part of this anymore. Even if they see me, I'm not really here. And I wonder if I ever was here, or if I was born a ghost, and maybe that's why the car didn't end things for me. Maybe I never really existed. And that black hole is wide open inside me, and it would be easy to let go and fall in.

Only I did that once, and it wasn't any better inside. Don't let anyone tell you that there's bliss in oblivion. It's just another kind of hell.

I skirt the courthouse plaza where everyone hangs out, bumming cigarettes and scaring the tourists. I don't belong here either. They look at me — the punks and the whores and the guys just hanging, and they know it. That I don't belong. I'm weirded out again, and I head up away from the river — up into the hills where the rich people live, and I sit on a stone wall behind this big mansion. Below me the city shimmers in the sun — old brick warehouses and tall new skyscrapers divided by the river, stitched back together again with the bridges. The crummy old buildings and the shiny new ones all fit together in a weird way — patches of darkness and light that don't have a lot to do with color, or maybe it's a new color that I couldn't see before. But whatever, all of a sudden I see it as a whole — a single giant sculpture made up of brick and concrete and wood, only it has its own soul, and we're part of that soul — the suits, and the mohawk crowd in the square — even the hookers and the dealers.

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It...works. And for the first time I think I understand what Daniel meant when he talked about finding God in a building.

I think maybe Daniel's powerful too, like Hammer or Keri, only he doesn't know it. And all of a sudden I'm sadder than I've ever been in my life. So I go back down the hill, and I walk through the city all day, and I'm a ghost and nobody notices. But they never really did.

THE SUN IS SETTING by the time I get back to Daniel's place. The sky looks like a raw wound — full of bloody light and bruise-colored clouds. The little shop is still open so I go in the front door. And the little old Chinese guy steps out into the archway that opens into his shop like he's been waiting for me.

"When you look at the flame of a candle," he says. "The flame is still there when you close your eyes."

"Yeah?" I kind of edge past him, because he's giving me goosebumps for no good reason. "But it's just this image in your head."

"Does that make it less real?"

"Wait a minute," I say, but he just shuffles back into his shop and picks up his feather duster. I wonder if he spends all day dusting stuff, and I go on upstairs, telling myself that he's just an old man.

But his words chase me the way Hammer's music did last night. It's too much like what I felt today on the streets. The city blinked and I'm just an afterimage on its collective retina. I'm wanting to shiver again as I open the door. Daniel is sitting on the edge of his big table, and he sort of lights up when he sees me — like he thought maybe I wasn't coming back. Keri is with him.

He's right about her being some kind of power. Sitting there she fills the room with light. Not a light that you can see, but I feel it, like the first spring day after a long cold winter. And I want her all of a sudden — I want to own that warmth. Possess it. And she wants to give it to me — because she figures she owes me.

But she loves Hammer. It's like music that you can't quite hear all mixed in with that light. Maybe she's not even hearing it herself right now, but it's there. "Hey, Daniel," I say, and I punch his arm lightly as he comes over to lock the door behind me.

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"Hey." He looks like he wants to touch me, walks back over to the table and sits on it instead.

"I went up to the top of the hills," I say to him. "I saw the city — all the buildings, all together. You're right about God," I say.

He just looks at me, and his eyes are the same color as rain clouds when it's just drizzling.

"We can talk to Dicey when the band takes their break." Keri's talking to me like I'm the only person in the room. "I brought Thai food." She nods at a bunch of white cartons on the table.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Daniel says.

"So what do you want him to do?" Keri snaps. "Just hang around and wait?"

"No." I shake my head. That's what I did all day today. That was enough. "If you guys think Dicey has some answers, I want to go ask." And what if he tells me that I'll be like this forever?

I've already been like this forever.

Daniel gets up suddenly and touches my shoulder. "Okay, we'll go ask," he says. And then he goes into the narrow little kitchen to get plates and stuff.

Keri lays out the throwaway chopsticks, plastic packets of fish sauce and hot sauce that came with the food. I scoop a pile of *pad Thai* onto my plate. Can a ghost eat? I take a bite, noodles trailing down my chin. Daniel is watching me, pretending not to. I chew them up and swallow, but I'm not hungry, and they don't taste good. They don't taste bad, either. I push the plate away. "How come you left Hammer, Keri?"

She stares at the tangle of *pad Thai* on her chopsticks. "He started saying things...about you. And me." She lays the food down on her plate, blushing hard. "I don't know how it got started. I mean...we were supposed to go to...your funeral. And all of a sudden Hammer is accusing me..." She shook her head. "I think Dicey said something and that set him off. He can get real jealous sometimes. I don't know." She looks away. "I don't know how he could even think that."

Yeah, she's in love with him. "Dicey again?" Something is bothering me, but I can't pin it down. "He's always around, isn't he?"

"You know...I used to wonder if he...had a crush on Hammer." She shoots Daniel a quick glance. "I never...liked him much. But Hammer did.

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Well, he lasted longer with Hammer than I did." She stabs her chopsticks into the pile of food on her plate. A springroll slides off onto the tabletop but she doesn't seem to notice.

Daniel is eating quietly, but I can see that he's not really paying much attention to his food. He's feeding his body the way you'd feed your dog. My fingers are tracing my scars again. It's dark outside. "Let's go on over to Luna Two," I say to them. "We can get a good table."

EVEN THIS EARLY Luna Two is packed. The music leaks out into the street and hooks people inside, heavy and dark, full of power. We sit at this little table along the crumbling brick wall. The place used to be a warehouse or something a hundred years ago, and it's really dark, full of old beams and shadows. The crummy little stage is flooded with bloody light. Randy, the front man, is bawling lyrics into the mike, but it's Hammer who's really center stage.

Barechested, he hunches over his bass, his muscles bulging like he's fighting for his life, coaxing that dark, angry, hungry music out of his blood red bass. Dicey is really working the drums, his face shiny with sweat, grinning like a withered little demon. And the crowd is all Hammer's. The music pulses through everyone, comes out in drumming fingers, swaying bodies, eyes that glitter with its bloody hunger.

It scares me. I want to get up and get out of here — talk to Dicey later. I've never heard Hammer play like this, and I look sideways at Keri. She's frowning, too, and I get the feeling something is wrong. Then Daniel leans close.

"Dicey just saw us." He's almost shouting in my ear, but I can barely make out the words over the music.

I nod and look at the stage. Dicey grins right at me. The red-filtered spots fill his eyes with bloody light and for an instant his teeth look pointed, like animal fangs.

The music changes. I realize that it's him doing it. He's laying down the skeleton of the music with his drums and Hammer's fleshing it out. It swells and grows, filling the brick-walled space with rage and hunger and a cold, cunning hatred. The music flows into me, burning like acid, turning my knees weak even as I cover my ears with both hands. Around

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us, people are swaying, moving, eyes on the stage, lips drawn back from their teeth. Hammer looks at me and his face is full of hatred. He slams a chord out of his bass that hits me in the gut, flings me back against the brick wall.

At another table, a skinny guy wearing a biker jacket grabs his chest and doubles over. Falls to the floor. Gasping, I struggle to stay on my feet. The bricks scrape my palms and I concentrate on that pain, fighting the blackness that's tunneling my vision. "Hammer, stop it," I yell, but I can't even hear the words. The whole building is shaking. Bricks grate together with the sound of teeth grinding and dust sifts down on my face, filling my eyes with grit and tears.

A light bulb pops with a blue flash and people start screaming. The floor is undulating like in an earthquake and everyone is scrambling for the door, clawing at each other, trampling on the poor suckers who fall down. A table goes over as the dying biker's friends take off. It hits Daniel and knocks him down. Someone falls over him, and he vanishes in the crowd as more bulbs pop, and there's no light at all except for the bloody spots. And Randy's on his knees clutching the mike, and I'm screaming Daniel's name, and the spots are focused on Dicey and Hammer, and the music is tearing the damn place apart.

Only Keri isn't hurt. She's standing there and nobody bumps into her, nobody shoves her, and there's no light, but I can see her anyway. She keeps looking at Hammer, and her face is full of the worst sadness I've ever seen, so that I stumble a step away from the shuddering wall, wanting to go to her, put my arms around her, make it better. Onstage Hammer looks at me again, and slams out a new riff.

The music clubs me and I almost black out. My head hits the bricks as I stagger backward and red light fills the blackness. The music pounds at me, at the wall, and I can feel it cracking, coming apart. And in a second it's going to come straight down and bury me. And Keri sees it, too, and she screams, and then she's running toward me and the bricks are falling.

And she's going to die. I'm already dead, but she forgot that. And Dicey is grinning with his demon teeth, laughing at me like he's just won. And I get it. All of a sudden.

He wants to kill Keri. Because without Keri he can use Hammer's power. And I see the car coming again, and the sun glares on the

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windscreen, but this time I catch a glimpse of the face behind the glare, and I feel again that instant of shock when I recognize Dicey. And then the car hits me and the impact that isn't pain knocks me out of my body...

I'm just a wedge to split Hammer and Keri. The first brick bounces off my shoulder. And now I'm bait to get Keri killed.

"No!" I scream, but the music pins me down and I can't move.

Daniel staggers to his feet and grabs Keri, and she fights him, and they both go down, and bricks are falling on them, only they're falling in slow motion. Another one bounces off my arm, and it hurts like hell, but hey, I'm just an image on the city's retina and they don't damage me. A chunk hits Daniel on the side of the head, and I see blood on his face, and the whole damn wall is crumbling, and up onstage Dicey is grinning and rocking, pounding out his victory on his damn drums.

All my life I've been nothing — a flesh and blood ghost, and I could have died anytime and nobody would have cared. And for a while I thought I had some kind of meaning, but I don't. Not even now. And it rises up inside me — darkness — the whole damn deep well of it — and it's stronger than the music and I take one long step toward that stage, and Dicey, who owns Hammer now. And he looks at me and I'm nothing, dirt, and he curls his lip because he doesn't need me anymore. Then he raises his sticks to drum the music out of Hammer that'll wipe me right off the city's retina.

And I take hold of it — that darkness — and it burns me with cold and I see just how shitty I really am. And it sucks in all the music — all Hammer's hunger and rage and lust — turns it cold and ugly, and I hold onto it, shape it. Aim it. Throw it.

Dicey's grin stretches inhumanly wide and his eyes are full of bloody light as it hits. His eyes go out like a turned-off light bulb and he falls backward, one drumstick flying end over end into the air, so high that it just misses one of the overhead spots. He hits the stage with a crash, and Hammer falters on his bass because the drums have stopped, and then he lets the chords fade. And the stick falls to the floor in eerie silence and the clatter of it is so loud that I put my hands over my aching ears. It is so silent now that I wonder if I have gone deaf.

The club is empty of everyone who was capable of leaving. Two or three bodies are sprawled on the floor, and a couple of them are groaning. Randy is hunched into a fetal curl onstage still clutching the mike. Daniel

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and Keri lie clasped together like lovers beneath the fallen bricks. Hammer stands there in the light, shoulders bowed over his bass. He doesn't lift his head as I climb onto the stage. Dicey lies on his back, arms out, feet together, like a crucifix. His eyes stare into space, wide and empty, like nothing has ever lived there.

Behind me someone moans. Keri. I spin around. I was sure they were dead, had heard it in Dicey's drumbeat of triumph and believed it. Hammer puts the bass down in a discordant blare of sound and is off the stage before I can take a step. He flings bricks aside like they're made out of paper, and then he has Keri in his arms, cradling her against his chest. Weeping. And Keri is touching his face and nobody is going to doubt how much she loves him. I climb down from the stage and walk slowly over to Daniel. And I'm afraid. But then his eyelids flicker, and I'm on my knees beside him throwing bricks aside as I uncover him. His face is all bloody and he whimpers as I move his left arm. Broken, I think. But he opens his eyes as I claw bricks from his chest. "Is she okay?" he whispers.

His eyes are bright with pain but he's talking clearly. Sirens are screaming. The cavalry is on the way. "Yeah." I hold him gently down as he tries to sit up. Moving his arm turns his face white and sweaty. "Lie still, damn it," I say. "Hammer has her." He has picked her up like some movie hero and carried her up onto the stage. Randy is sitting there looking dazed, and they're murmuring together, oblivious to everything. "They getting it back together," I tell him. "Happy ending." Only maybe it isn't, because Dicey's body isn't on the stage anymore. I look around and I don't see him anywhere.

And I start to shake because it's finally hitting me — what just happened. And I wonder what would have happened if Dicey had kept control of Hammer, and I'm not sure I want to think about it. Not in this day of mass distribution of music. And all I want to do is put my head down on Daniel's chest and cry.

Because I did what I was supposed to do and more. And it was all an accident, and anytime now the city will blink again and I'll be gone. And Daniel has his good arm around me, and I can hear cops and firemen and God knows who else yelling to each other in the street, and they'll be in in a minute to put Daniel on a stretcher and take him off to the emergency room to fix his arm. "Will you go back to it?" I whisper. "Doing God in

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buildings? I think maybe it's important. I think maybe you could...change the city. Change the world even." Maybe it could balance the Diceys. Maybe it's supposed to.

"You're bleeding," Daniel says. He touches my scalp and shows me the bright blood on his fingers. "You're going to need stitches."

I reach up and touch my scalp and I wince because there's this huge jagged gash and my hair is thick with blood. And it's not healing. And it should heal, because when the bricks hit me they didn't even bruise me. But I touch it again and it's still bleeding and it still hurts. And Daniel's face is so bright with hope that I have to look away. Because I want to hope that hard, too. "Dicey was driving the car." I wipe that bright hopeful blood on my jeans. "I wonder if he...did this to me."

"If he did, maybe his dying changed something. Or maybe somebody else gave you another chance. Hell," Daniel says softly. "I don't know the rules. Do you?"

"No." I lick my lips, tasting old dust. I realize that I want to be here even after the city blinks. The black hole inside me has closed up — or maybe I just emptied it all into Dicey. Anyway, it's gone.

And then there are all these uniformed people in the place, and a couple of them are bending over Daniel, taking control the way medical people do. And another one — a woman is poking at my scalp, shining a light into my eyes. She gives me a gauze pad to hold onto the cut and escorts me to a waiting ambulance, holding my elbow in a grip that feels more like capture than support. And they're bringing Daniel on a stretcher, and he's cradling his broken arm and he looks like hell, but he winks at me.

And I wink back, and the paramedic lady frowns and gives me another wad of gauze because I'm still bleeding. And I don't feel like a ghost anymore. And I wonder how much legal shit I'm going to have to wade through to prove I'm alive. Maybe I'll have to dig up the coffin to prove that I'm not in there.

I walk out with the stretcher, holding Daniel's good hand. What a fucking mess.

Hey, it's a start anyway.

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Between such novels as Ancient Shores *and the recent* Eternity Road, *Jack McDevitt still finds time for the short stuff. Which is good. 'Cause if you know what's good for ya, you'll make sure you like this one.* Capice?

Variables

By Jack McDevitt

BIG AL WAS VERY GOOD AT his chosen line of work. He provided protection to small businessmen, created gambling opportunities, and was respected for his many services as peacemaker among the Chicago families. The latter activity had got him indirectly involved in various money laundering activities, and that in turn had got the feds interested. Nevertheless he was cautious and would probably have continued to prosper for years had Tony Bullets not cut a deal and traded him in. Tony went into protective custody, and Big Al headed for open country.

He had planned originally to retire to a little place in Oregon that nobody knew about. But a *Nova* special caught his attention, and two days later he arrived with two associates at the Orin Randall Physics Laboratories outside Minneapolis.

Big Al did not like to show hardware. The practice was heavy-handed and lacking in taste. In the social circles through which he customarily moved, it was rarely necessary. Enlightened people generally understood

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a tightening of the jaws or a sudden silence. Significant communication is always implied.

But among those not sensitive to the diplomatic niceties, it is sometimes necessary to be more direct. Al knew instinctively that nonverbal communication would not work with the people at Randall. The receptionist blinked at him as if he were looking for a handout, told him Dr. Seabright was busy, and did not respond in a positive manner until Henny explained that he hoped he wouldn't be forced to shoot her. She responded by leading them into a lab where a man and a woman stood in front of a bank of computer screens. Both turned and stared.

The receptionist mumbled a frightened apology.

Big Al took an instant dislike to Archie Seabright. He could see immediately that the man was not polished. He was nondescript, much like Rat Silvana if you could imagine Rat in bifocals and a white lab coat. He wore a lot of pens in his breast pocket, he tended to look over the tops of his bifocals, and his hair was going fast. Dunk took his cue and showed him a piece. Seabright's mouth opened and closed. Henny brought in the luggage and locked the door.

"What is this?" demanded Seabright in a voice that had a lot of squeak. "Please get out. The general public is not allowed in here."

It always amazed Al that certain types of persons will go out of their way to annoy an armed man.

The woman who was standing beside him laid a hand on his arm, cautioning him. She had black hair and good features and she was trying not to look scared.

"Lady," Al said, "what is your name?"

She looked steadily back at Al. A good babe. "Janet Keel," she said.

"Okay, Janet Keel. Nobody has anything to be afraid of. We are only here to conduct a little business, and then we will be leaving."

The lab was a long whitewashed room ringed with desks piled high with printouts and binders and magazines. Posters with illustrations of atomic cross sections and occluding gases and other abstractions covered the walls. There was a vague noxious smell, as if a fire had just gone out.

The device that Al had seen on *Nova* occupied the center of the room. It looked like a ten-foot-high bell jar made of steel struts, cable, wire netting, plastic and glass. It was raised on a low platform and open in front.

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A table, crowded with computers and electronic gear, wrapped around the other three sides.

"Just relax, Doc," Al said, switching his attention back to Seabright. "I have a proposition for you."

Seabright's eyes had locked on the gun. "You don't need that."

Dunk caught Al's glance and put the weapon away. Seabright started breathing again. "The boys and I have a problem," Al said. "There are certain parties about fifteen minutes behind us, and we don't want to be here when they show up. It is in fact essential that we move out of their jurisdiction." He took a long, satisfied look at the bell jar. "Tell me about this thing." A signal passed between Seabright and the woman, by which Al grasped that their relationship was more than merely professional. His respect for her declined.

"I don't know what you mean," Seabright said.

"Doc, we are not going to get anywhere with that attitude. The boys and I would like to use this little exit that you have. If I understood you correctly on TV the other night, we can clear out of here and go to another Chicago, right? One that's like ours, but isn't quite the same."

Seabright's jaw tightened. "Not to Chicago. Minneapolis, maybe. But not Chicago."

"Why not? If you can do the one, why not the other? What's the difference?"

Seabright started to push his hands into his pockets, saw Dunk's piece appear again, and changed his mind. "The Tunnel opens onto this exact spot. No matter which terminal universe we look at, it's always *here*. Of course, most of the time, *here* is only empty space."

"Why is that, Doc?"

"Because in the vast majority of cosmic sequences, there is no definable structure of any kind. Just a few gases."

"Oh."

"Where there are worlds, there is rarely an Earth. But the point is, Randall Labs is located on a couple of hills outside Minneapolis. That's the only place we can send you. At least, the only place where you'll be happy."

Al ignored the attempt at sarcasm. "Let's get to it. Get me a place that's a lot like this one, Doc, and we'll make it worth your while." He

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fished out a roll of hundreds about six inches thick, showed it to him, and laid it on a chair.

"It's not a good idea."

"Turn it on, Doc."

Seabright bent over the wraparound table and toggled a couple of switches. Lamps began to blink. Janet sat down at a keyboard. "You have to understand, Mr. — ?"

"His name's Big Al," said Henny. He had wandered over close to the window, where he could watch the parking lot. Dunk stood behind Janet.

"You have to understand, Big Al, it's untested. We've never sent anyone through it. I don't know what might happen. You could be killed."

"Don't worry, Doc. We'll take our chances."

"No. If something goes wrong, God knows what might happen to the project."

"Doc, I could shoot you now and let Janet try. Whatever you want." Dunk began screwing a silencer ostentatiously onto his muzzle.

"It would have been easier," Seabright said, "if you'd given me advance notice."

"Yeah. Well, unfortunately, the feds didn't call me for an appointment, either." Al glanced at Henny. Henny shook his head no. Nothing yet. "If I understood you right, Doc, the same people live in these other places. But stuff is different. Janet there for example might be a redhead."

"That's right. The variables will change."

"So Big Al might not be so big?"

"In some places they might call you *Little* Al."

Al smiled. He appreciated a sense of humor in a man standing on the wrong end of the artillery.

Seabright played with the keyboards, Janet helped, and they both tried to look as if there was no chance it would work.

"If the feds get here before you two are finished there's going to be some shooting. Probably nobody will walk out of this room. In fact, I could guarantee it."

Seabright nodded, and walked into the bell jar. He poked at cables and tapped gauges and pronounced himself satisfied. The floor inside was covered with a black rubber mat. "It's not a good idea," he said again.

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Henny caught his eye. The feds were in the parking lot. They had five minutes. "Okay, Doc. Show me how you do it."

"It's simple enough." Seabright came back out and pointed at the keyboard. "Amber light means it's still powering up."

"How long will it take?"

"Another minute." His fingers moved across the keys. Four sets of twenty zeros blinked onto a monitor. "Coordinates," he said. "They determine what's at the other end of the tunnel." He entered numbers and most of the zeros converted to positive values. When he was satisfied, he pushed back from the terminal. "Okay, I think we're ready." The amber lamp turned green. More green lights blinked on around the system. "If you want to step inside, we'll get going."

Al pushed down beside him. "Which button, Doc?"

"What do you mean?"

"Which button makes it work?"

He pointed at a large square press pad that was as white as his face.

"Okay. Let's try it with you first." He nodded toward the bell jar. "Get in."

"You can't do that," said Seabright. "You don't know how to bring me back."

That was true. After all, they needed somebody to operate the thing. "Tell you what. Why don't we push Janet there through? See what happens?" Janet's eyes narrowed. If looks could kill, that little babe would have had them all for dinner.

Dunk eased his right hand into his pocket. (This was the kind of elegance that Al appreciated in his people.) Janet got up and the moment froze while they all waited for something to happen.

Seabright had come half out of his chair. But he slipped back down and tapped his fingers nervously on the table. "Let me make some final adjustments." He began to poke in a new set of coordinates.

Al grinned. "If there's anything I can't stand, Doc, it's people that aren't up front with me. I am not happy with you. You are lucky I am essentially good-hearted."

Seabright was trying to return the smile. "No," he said. "I just realized there was a better terminus. I'd forgot about it. We found it last night. It's a lot like here."

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"I hope so. But I think it would be a good idea if you came along, just to reassure me."

Seabright opened his mouth to argue but thought better of it.

"Al," said Henny, "they're coming in the front door. Whatever we're going to do here, we better do it."

Big Al nodded. Henny picked up the bags and dragged them into the bell jar. Dunk said something to Janet. Al couldn't hear the specifics, but he knew she was being told her life depended on sitting still for the next minute or two. He looked at Seabright.

Seabright traded nervous glances with Janet. "You've got the con," he told her. He got up, walked into the bell jar, and stood beside the baggage.

Al and Dunk followed him, and when they were all inside, Seabright signaled Janet.

"Good luck," she whispered. Big Al noted with pleasure and with some disquiet that a tear was rolling down her cheek.

She touched the white presspad. Power flowed into the system. The lights dimmed and the bell jar filled with a brick-red glow. It came in like a rising tide and Al's feet and ankles began to feel as if a mild electrical current were running through them.

Janet Keel raised one hand to wave goodbye. Al watched her, admiring her exquisite appearance and thinking how good she would have looked on his arm. Her shoulder-length black hair swirled as she got up and came around to stand directly in front of the bell jar, just outside its energy field, her dark eyes locked on Seabright.

Henny and Dunk no longer appeared solid. Henny, fading into the red light, was looking at his watch. Dunk's eyes were squeezed shut.

The room faded, flickered, and *stretched*. It was as if they were watching a reflection in a distorted mirror. All definition flowed out of it, and the floor no longer existed. Al drifted in a fiery cloud. He felt a surge of vertigo and then tumbled forward and fell hard on his face.

He was back in the lab.

Janet stood off to one side. She walked past him and out of his view. "Archie," she said, "are you all right?"

The walls had changed color: these were light green. And the room was smaller. Most of the desks were gone. The bell jar had become a cube, its tangle of glass and wiring had disappeared inside metal walls. He

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twisted around so he could see Janet. She had thrown herself into Seabright's arms. But she wore a *yellow* lab coat, and her black hair was cut short.

"Doc, I think you did it."

The boys looked a little shaky, but they were okay. And the luggage had come through.

Al was still trying to get his bearings when the lab door broke open and a half-dozen feds spilled into the room, guns drawn. At least, Al thought they were feds. They were dressed in brightly colored suits with hand-painted red ties and yellow hats. He recognized Frank O'Connell, the Chicago SAC. O'Connell looked so funny Al laughed out loud.

"I'm glad you're amused, Al," said O'Connell. "We should be able to provide you with a lot of laughs over the next thirty years."

"I don't get it," said Al. "What happened?"

O'Connell's confederates slapped cuffs on him and they read him his rights.

"Doc?" Al glared accusingly at Seabright, who seemed preoccupied with the cube. "Doc, you said everything would be different here."

"I said the variables were subject to change. But human nature? I wonder."

O'Connell took him by the elbow and pushed him toward the door. "Say, Al," he said, "you need to cut back a little. You've been gaining weight."

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Nancy Etchemendy lives in Menlo Park, California, with her husband and son... and no cats. She's allergic to them. She reports also that she's on a restricted vegetarian diet that would forbid her from touching Esmeralda's cooking. Which may explain in part what inspired her to write this exploration of the ways in which people sometimes can't help killing each other with kindness.

Saints and Martyrs

By Nancy Etchemendy

IN THE STEAMY, CHICKENY kitchen, cats paced and mewed, rubbing against Esmeralda's ample legs. Outside, the town lay cold and voluptuous with snow. She gazed through the window, filled with unreasonable longing, and spoke to the saints as she opened the oven and basted chickens with butter drippings.

"Soon, Cecilia. Soon, Eustace and Sebastian and Saint Joan, my dears. Chicken dinner for everyone. There's nothing like roast chicken on a snowy evening." The cats — each named for a favorite saint, as her cats had always been — purred, drifting around her ankles like wayward clouds.

Two chickens, she thought closing the oven door. One for the cats, and one for her and Maurice. The window drew her gaze again, with its view of restful curves and feathery flakes. She remembered a time when three chickens, not two, were the norm. Three chickens to be divided among her and Maurice and the four children who had gone their own

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ways long since. In those days, the animals only got scraps. Flossie the dog, dead now, had loved the necks and gizzards. The cats had gobbled hearts, kidneys, and bits of gristle. These new cats were spoiled, she thought as she stooped to stroke Saint Cecilia's velvety brown and white neck. Only meat and skin for them. She smiled. There was no one left to spoil now except the cats — and her husband.

Above the murmur of the ball game, she heard Maurice call from the living room. "About time for a drink, Em, isn't it?"

Esmeralda looked at her watch. Four-thirty. "It's not five yet, dear," she called in reply.

"What do you mean?" Maurice had the whine in his voice, which meant he wanted her to think he'd been unfairly wounded.

Esmeralda walked to the living room. Football players rammed each other on the television screen. Chips and dip littered the table beside the recliner, which periodically creaked under the pressure of Maurice's portly frame. Saint Eustace jumped into his lap.

"It's not five yet," she repeated.

"But it's a Sunday afternoon," said Maurice, scratching softly under Eustace's chin. "There's chicken for dinner. I don't see what's wrong with celebrating a little."

Maurice pushed at the boundaries of things. This had always been his way, but it had never mattered so much before. Three weeks after his retirement from the insurance firm where he had worked for forty years, he suffered a heart attack. The doctors advised him to give up alcohol completely. It added too much to his weight, they said. But his pre-dinner bourbon had been a beloved part of his life for so long that Esmeralda softened eventually. What could it hurt, one drink each day at five? She'd started with half an ounce in plain seltzer, but Maurice complained bitterly. It tasted like water with aspirin in it. Couldn't he have his 7-Up back? But after she had taken pity and bought him the sugary mixer, he still complained. Surely a full ounce of bourbon wouldn't hurt, just once each day. It tasted so much better. She had relented.

She had also relented about the low-fat diet. Night after night he sat joyless before plates of plain rice, vinegary salad, dry string beans, begging for a bit of steak, a tiny piece of cheese. She remembered how lustily he ate in the days when she had cooked beef Stroganoff, scalloped potatoes,

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ham glazed with marmalade. He was a man who smiled and grunted with pleasure and mopped his shining head whenever he dealt with good food. How could she take that away from him? To see him slumped at the table as if he were dining on sand was more than she could bear.

So it had come to this. Maurice had his bourbon and his roast chicken, he took his "daily" walks if and when it pleased him, and played nine holes of golf on Saturdays when the weather and the season were right. He told Esmeralda over and over again that she was an angel from heaven; he petted her, took her hand when she stepped from the Chrysler, proclaimed his adoration with yellow roses and boxes of candy. When he did these things, a buttery glow filled her, as if in some secret inner place she wore a halo. He was like the cottage garden which, in her caring hands, smiled with happy scent and color nine months of the year. He was like the children, like the cats. She knew how to please him, and it gave her great joy.

Only now, pleasing Maurice had become complex, almost frightening. Pleasing him was no longer in his best interests, or so the doctors said.

"Come on, Em. It's only half an hour earlier than usual. What can that hurt?" said Maurice.

A great desire for rest came over Esmeralda as she stood in the doorway beside the recliner, her husband's face a picture of pleading.

"Oh, all right," she said. "But you won't make a habit of it, will you?"

Maurice grinned, his cheeks as rosy as a toddler's. "Of course not," he said, and gave Eustace a delighted squeeze.

Esmeralda smiled, too, filled against her will with the wonderful wine-yellow glow of his happiness. She returned to the kitchen and fixed two bourbons, one for him and one for herself, while the saints resumed their purring around her ankles, and outside the snow continued to fall.

The next morning Maurice, Esmeralda, and the cats awoke to a world transformed by icy frosting. Though the storm was over now, an additional thirteen inches of snow had fallen during the night. A breeze tossed frozen crystals into the air, where the sun danced as if upon slivers of glass. The two youngest cats, Saints Eustace and Cecilia, dabbed their noses into this mysterious cold whiteness and retreated to the cozy kitchen in alarm. Joan and Sebastian, on the other hand, windmilled through it as if

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swimming, headed for higher ground. When they returned, Esmeralda carried them to the fireside and pulled small hard snowballs from their belly fur with fluffy towels.

Maurice ate a large breakfast as Esmeralda mixed bits of chopped bacon into the saints' food and drizzled it with pan drippings. He napkined egg from his mouth, and washed down heart and blood pressure pills with gulps of fresh orange juice.

"I wish I were one of your cats," he said jovially.

"Don't be silly," said Esmeralda. It was a running joke between them, that she treated the cats better than she treated Maurice.

He rose from the table smiling and gave her a powerful hug. In his youth, he had been an amateur wrestler. Later, when the children were growing up, he had coached Little League and football. His stout, aging figure echoed that athletic past. Except for the bulge of his stomach, his body was square and compact, his neck and shoulders massive. His arms and legs, though short, were thick and still impressively strong. He looked vigorous. It was hard for Esmeralda to believe that inside his big chest beat a clogged, pale heart. It went against all of her instincts. How could someone look so healthy, eat so heartily, and be so ill?

Maurice gazed thoughtfully out the window. "I feel great today. Guess the weather agrees with me. Maybe I'll shovel the walk."

"Shovel the walk?" cried Esmeralda. "But you mustn't. The doctors..."

"Oh, bother the doctors." Maurice smiled almost impishly. "I won't overdo it. I know when to quit."

"Yes, well, even so, I'm not sure..." said Esmeralda.

But Maurice was already donning his heavy coat and wool golf cap. "You're always begging me to go out and get some fresh air. Well, now I want to and you're worried about it. Women!" Maurice's mouth pulled down in a pout. His cheeks glowed pinkly.

This was the sort of argument she nearly always lost. Maybe it wouldn't hurt him to shovel the walk for a few minutes, just this once. Saint Joan squirmed in her arms, anxious for the bacon breakfast, escaped her grasp, bounded away in a furry flash.

"Oh, all right," she said.

* * *

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A little while later, Esmeralda went out to check on Maurice. "How about a break, dear," she called from the porch. "I've brought you some hot cocoa." She had made it in a mug just the way he loved it, half milk, half cream, extra sugar, two marshmallows.

Ever after, she remembered the tiniest details of the moment — the pat-pat of icicles melting in the brilliant sun, the footprints of chickadees in the snow beside his bluish face, the way the hot mug of cocoa burst into pieces a minute after she dropped it in the frigid whiteness, intact one instant, shattered the next like her own soul, because it couldn't take the sudden change.

He was dead before the paramedics arrived. Dead, they said, before she found him. There was nothing she could have done. But later in the day, waiting for the children to arrive from their far-flung homes, she wept as she washed the breakfast dishes. She could have made his life miserable; that was something she could have done. The world was filled with choices that weren't really choices at all, and now what was she to do, after fifty years of dear Maurice who gave her yellow roses, the only person who had ever called her Em, what was she to do without him?

She stared out the window as she had done the day before, only now the sight of the snow made her feel trapped. All the while, around her ankles, the saints floated like wayward clouds.

ESMERALDA'S CHILDREN swooped into the isolated town at different times in rented cars they had driven from a distant airport. A girl, two boys, another girl; she had always loved that symmetry. She wished they were youngsters again, before the luggage, the spouses, the grief and urgency. She wished the occasion were Christmas, that the four of them waited rosy-cheeked at the big oak dining table while Maurice carved a turkey, she trammed bowls of sweet potatoes and dressing from the kitchen, and carolers sang on the radio. Instead, she sat bereft and incompetent in Maurice's chair with Saint Sebastian asleep on her lap, and watched as her son Richard's wife pressed Maurice's best black suit.

The children organized everything. She swam through the rituals as if through gray jelly, slowly, feeling her way. The funeral was held at the small Catholic church she and Maurice had attended for years. She nearly

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disconsolately. "Oh, my dears," she murmured weepily, "I have so much time now."

She lay down in her bed half dressed, without dinner, and slept through the night, wakening only once to cry when she realized the warm bulk beside her was not Maurice but a tumble of cats. If Jennifer's phone call ever came, she did not hear it.

She had trouble making up her mind about even the smallest things. She spent whole days gazing out at the snow, wondering whether to fry eggs for breakfast or settle for peanut butter toast. Should she put on her coat and go shopping? If she did go out, should she drive or should she walk? Would God understand if she failed to appear for Mass?

Once or twice, it occurred to her that she could sell the house and move elsewhere. But decisions of that magnitude terrified her. So life tended to stay as it was, deteriorating in a predictable, majestic way, like a glacier spilling into the sea. Outside, the depth of the snow increased inch by inch; inside, dust settled undisturbed.

Sometimes she forgot for a second or two that Maurice was dead. She would do some small thing — set a place for him at the table, get up to fix his drink at five. At such times, she felt as if someone had reached inside her and ripped out the part that was Maurice. Anyone walking into the room would surely see the black nothingness his death had left, would sense the wind blowing through her. She couldn't hide it. Nor could she, now in the midst of tribulation, make herself believe that Maurice waited for her in some warm and golden afterlife. The pain was overwhelming.

She stopped attending her book group, let her watercolor classes slide, turned down luncheon dates with friends until finally they stopped asking. At some point, she realized that she only got up in the mornings because of the saints. She often awakened to the little tickle of their whiskers or tongues, the pressure of furred paws on her bosom. They wanted to be let in and out, to be fed, to be dried by the warmth of a fire. They *needed* her.

Toward the end of February, another big storm arrived. Snow began to fall late in the afternoon, and flakes the size of quarters drifted innocently onto the previous accumulation, now nearly a foot-and-a-half deep. Esmeralda made dinner for the cats and heated a can of soup for

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herself. When she had finished, she donned a flannel nightgown, turned out all the lamps, and lay down on the couch with her favorite quilt. A small log burned on the hearth. The cats stretched themselves before it luxuriously. Beyond the window, the snowy night looked brighter than the room, weirdly pink and silent. Perhaps she closed her eyes. Hours or moments later, she heard a cry.

Her first thought was of a child, frightened, howling for its mother. Then it came again, closer, and she realized that if it were a child it must be hideously defective, for although it did not sound like an animal, it did not sound quite human either. All four of the cats had heard it, too. Saint Eustace lifted his head and stared with pointed curiosity. The fur stood in a ridge along Saint Joan's sleek spine. The cry came a third time, nearer still. She thought she detected movement through the French doors that opened from the living room into the snowy half-light of the garden.

Esmeralda stood up, clutching the quilt tightly about herself. The fire had burned to embers. *It's dark in here, darker than outside,* she thought. *Whatever it is, it won't be able to see in.* Cautiously, she stepped toward the door. She saw nothing at first, perhaps because she expected something large.

The cry came again, "Eeee-ooowm!" It was so unlike anything she had ever heard before that it made her shudder. Several seconds passed before she realized that the muddy lump of snow below the eaves was not snow at all, but something capable of motion. It appeared to squirm toward her, to stop, then to wriggle forward again as if hesitant, afraid, or merely weak.

She couldn't see very well in the eerie storm light, separated from whatever it was by double panes of reflective door glass. It occurred to her that it might be an animal in need of help. Having had this thought, she knew what she would do, though it took her a moment to stop denying it. If she did not open the door, guilt would gnaw at her all night. If she did open it, what precisely could she lose? At most, a joyless life.

She depressed the latch and opened the door. Freezing air swept into the room. Crumblings of snow fell onto the carpet. She leaned out for a better look. The thing beneath the eaves scuttled toward her in a silent flurry; Esmeralda's heart flung itself painfully against her ribs. She saw icy flakes drifting out of its path as if each second had lengthened. She saw it

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spring upward and watched, unable to move quickly enough, as bright claws unsheathed. Just before it attached itself to her shoulders, she saw marbles of snow frozen in the fur of its belly. It was a cat! A scrawny, applesauce-colored tom.

Reflexively, she ripped it from herself and flung it back into the cold darkness. Its grip was so desperate that it tore strips of material from her nightgown, and left bleeding trails in her skin. She stood stunned as chill air hit the scratches and pain scorched everything else from her mind. The cat gave its pitiful half-human cry again, "Eeee-ooowm!" as it struggled to right itself in the deep snow. She realized slowly and with surprise that it had not landed on its feet, but rather messily on one side. She wondered if it were sick, or just half frozen. Behind her, the saints crowded curiously in the doorway, noses held forward to catch the scent of the stranger.

She couldn't decide what to do. She felt indignant and betrayed. She had opened the door thinking of an injured animal in need of her help, a small, frightened being to take in and nurture and make happy, a way to pass the lonely night in the glow of good works. Instead, she'd received a terrible shock and scratches that bled and stung. The animal didn't behave like a cat, but like some deranged parody of one, a creature with something wrong inside that neither warmth nor food nor perhaps even love could cure.

Snowflakes collected on her eyelashes and in her hair. She trembled. "No," she said. The word fell short, stopped by falling snow. So she said it again, more loudly. "No!"

She stepped in and closed the door. Left outside on the step, the tom howled.

She headed toward the bathroom — the medicine cabinet filled with friendly swabs and disinfectants and plasters — turning on lights as she went. The cats followed her, mewing with concern and questions. She lifted the bloody nightgown carefully over her head, dropped it in a corner. Saints Joan and Cecilia sniffed it delicately. Saints Eustace and Sebastian made so bold as to lick at a particularly blood-dampened strip.

Esmeralda gazed at her disheveled image in the mirror. Her hair was wet. Snow water dripped into raw furrows that ran from her collar bones to her breasts. Below the scratches, the snow water continued in pink-tinted runnels over breasts elongated by years of nursing, the rounded hill

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of her stomach, down toward the whitening thatch of her womanhood, disused and almost forgotten. She would have to clean herself in a hot bath.

She ran steaming water, added oils of peach and cinnamon, smells that made her think of summer and kitchens and children. She lay back in the tub and let the water lap at her chin. After the first stinging moments, the pain from the cat's claws subsided. She closed her eyes. The only sounds were the dripping of the faucet, and far off in the snow, "Eeee-ooowm! Eeee-ooowm!" It sounded almost like her name.

Perhaps it was that thought that made her go back to the door after she was clean and warm, her scratches comfortably dressed, the fire leaping above a fresh log. The cat still crouched on the doorstep, half an inch of snow glimmering on its wet fur. Every cry contained the tremolo of its shivers. She wondered how the other cats would react to this foreigner in their midst if she brought it inside, and whether it would hurt them as it had her. She couldn't leave it outdoors to die. It was a bad thing to do, a thing that could ruin any shred of peace she might be lucky enough to find on this wretched night. She got a towel, threw it over the moaning creature, and lifted it carefully. It stopped crying immediately. This time, it seemed too far gone even to move, let alone strike with its claws.

She carried it to the hearth, where she toweled it until its fur stood up in damp tufts. It barely stirred. At times, she worried that it had died. The other cats seemed consumed with badly disguised interest. They stepped in feathery circles around her and the newcomer, sniffing the wet fur, rubbing against it almost affectionately, retreating in disdain to lick themselves, then returning to repeat the ritual. She detected no sign of flattened ears or twitching tails.

Their reaction was not what she had expected, yet she understood it. The tom did not smell like one. In Esmeralda's experience, tom cats — even dry — carried with them an odor of maleness so pungent and insistent that it was obvious even to the human nose. Tom cats, when wet, stank intolerably. She had prepared herself for this. Instead, she found the scent that rose up from the stranger's fur mild and somehow familiar, though she could not name it. Inexplicably, it made her feel more kindly toward him.

She wrapped him in a soft blanket and cuddled him in the crook of one arm while she heated a little milk on the stove. Because the cat was too

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weak to stand and drink, she dipped the corner of a cloth into the milk and let him suck it like a teat, brushing at his paws when he tried to knead her as if she were his mother. Before long, he began to purr, and stretched against her in contentment. For the first time in months, a few faint beams of cheer found their way through her grief. Perhaps the tom had only scratched her out of desperation, knowing somehow that if he clung to her, he would be warm and safe.

Weary and thinking of bed, Esmeralda fixed the new arrival a nest in front of the hearth. She continued to hold him as she shuffled through the house gathering old towels and blankets. The saints followed, sniffing and prancing, leaping onto shelves and tabletops for a better look at him.

Esmeralda addressed them somewhat distractedly. "What do you think, my dears? Shall we keep him? Does he please you?"

She accepted their mews and purrs as answers. "I agree," she said. "A period of probation. But I think we all like him, don't we? What's his name, do you suppose?"

Nothing came to mind. She was too tired to think of a name. "There you go, dear," she said as she laid him in the soft nest.

But he wouldn't have it. He stuck to her, claws prickling through her nightgown, eyes large. "Eeee-ooowm!" he cried. "Eeee-ooowm!" again and again, producing a tickle along her spine. The cry was so uncatlike, and with each repetition, seemed more and more like her name, "Em, Em," preposterous though it seemed.

In the end, she wrestled another log onto the fire, wrapped herself and the tom in the quilt, and lay down on the couch. The other cats snuggled in warm heaps around her. She sighed and closed her eyes, stroking the tom's head, enjoying his purrs as they mingled with those of the others.

"Is it better now, dear?" she murmured. "Yes, I thought so. Dear. Maybe that's your name."

She fell asleep with his strange, familiar smell in her nose, and a sense of well-being which she had not expected to feel again as long as she lived.

The next morning, she fried bacon, not because she had an appetite for it herself, but because she wanted drippings to pour over the tom's food. He was terribly emaciated and wobbly on his feet. She cooked a pound, far

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more than she could eat by herself, so there was plenty of grease for all five of the cats and strips of meat as well. She couldn't imagine bacon without eggs, so she fried a few, ate two herself, and gave the cats what was left.

"Do you like eggs, dear?" she asked as she mixed the tom's portion into his food. "They're over easy, a favorite in this house."

Watching him eat the bacon-and-egg-drizzled food was an experience of exquisite gratification. He crunched and grunted and moaned in pleasure, and periodically gazed up at her adoringly. She knew that he would have smiled if it were possible. She could not resist sweeping him into her arms when he was finished.

With the tom in the house, the remainder of the winter passed quickly. He was lovable and charming, never sprayed, never sharpened his claws on the furniture. He kept himself meticulously clean, and eschewed fighting with either strange cats or the saints. He adored watching television, and would perch in a chair watching the screen for hours at a time. Any program would do, though it seemed to Esmeralda that football fascinated him most. At night, he slept in the place of honor, on the pillow beside her head. Though she had never seen him bat or bare his teeth, the other cats deferred to him in a way she would never have predicted and could not explain. Sometimes, they even let him clean them. She often wondered about his past. He seemed so civilized. He must have had owners. What had happened to them?

By early spring, the tom had gained weight and looked as vigorous as a new furnace, freshly stoked and radiant. His short fur grew glossy and gorgeous in variegated shades of caramel and orange. She thought about names. She pored over *The Lives of the Saints*, but couldn't find one that fit, he seemed at once so jovial and unsaintly. So she continued to think of him as "the tom," and to call him "dear" when she spoke to him.

One night as she lay in bed with her cheek against his fur and the saints curled purring around her, she realized abruptly why his scent seemed so familiar. It was a certain leathery tartness, difficult to describe but unforgettable. He smelled like Maurice.

She sat up and stabbed blindly at the lamp switch, knocking magazines and cups off the bedside table. Startled, Saint Cecilia yowled and leaped to the floor. Esmeralda's pulse thrummed in her throat, her wrists, her ears. She bent and sniffed the tom's fur. Maurice!

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Tears rolled down her cheeks. How could she be sure? She threw off the covers and stumbled to the closet, slid hangers across the bar ferociously looking for some unwashed item of her dead husband's clothing. But the children had been thorough, and she too much in shock to stop them. It was bad for her to have his wardrobe there beside her own, they said, a constant painful reminder of his absence. They had given his things to Goodwill. Nothing remained. Not so much as a sock or a handkerchief.

She couldn't go to sleep, so she donned a robe and slippers and wandered to the kitchen to heat a glass of milk. It was March, and outside the wind snarled through the trees and tugged at the eaves. Every few minutes, a gust shook the house. She disliked it far more than the listless peace of falling snow.

"I wish I were one of your cats," Maurice had said on the morning of his death.

Silly. She had said it then, and she thought it now. Had her troubles finally driven her off the deep end? Fresh tears came, and she dabbed them away with the tissue she kept in her sleeve. She didn't want the milk, but she tried to drink it anyway. Perhaps attracted by the sound of her sipping and sobbing, the tom appeared. He sat in the middle of the rug, gazing at her with his head tipped and his tail twitching ever so slightly.

She noticed then, for the first time really, how much he'd filled out since his arrival. He had developed the build of a scrapper — square and compact, with a large neck and wide shoulders. His legs were short, and had become thick, so that he embodied a kind of amiable stability. Everything about him suddenly reminded her of Maurice.

She covered her face with her hands and wept. Gathered around her ankles, the saints rubbed and cried at her distress, while the tom licked through the gaps in her fingers with his rough, tickly tongue.

SHE BEGAN TO ATTEND the village book group again, and to clean the house once a week. She called an old friend and went to lunch with her. And on Sundays, she cooked chicken.

She and the cats thrived. She became rosy cheeked; the phone rang often; she took up watercolors again. In April, she cultivated the perennials in the cottage garden and planted fresh annuals — zinnias, petunias,

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marigolds. She called the children and invited them to spend weekends. Sometimes they came, often they did not, and she would spend a day or two in melancholic longing for their company. But the cats, and especially the tom, were good company, too.

Saints Eustace and Cecilia, the younger cats, grew chunky around the middle. Sebastian, Joan, and the tom grew fat. It was such a joy to watch them eat, to please them with tasty portions of their favorite dishes — meats, gravies, drippings.

In the middle of June, the tom became ill. Walking across the room, he suddenly wobbled and fell on his side. He could not get up. Esmeralda rushed him to the veterinarian's office, panic lodged in her throat.

The doctor kept him for several days, and sent her home with an admonishment. "He has a bad heart. You feed him too much. He needs to lose weight."

"Yes, doctor," she said, feeling hollow as a drum. She stopped on the way home to buy special food.

The tom hated it. He howled for an hour before resorting to his low-calorie kibbles. "Eeee-ooowm! Eeee-ooowm!" he cried. Esmeralda thought her heart would shatter.

She couldn't bear to watch him, to listen as he yowled at the door while, on Sundays, the saints devoured their usual portions of roast chicken and gravy. What could it hurt, she thought, to give him a bite or two of white meat? He took it from her fingertips, with the look of adoration that made her feel bright and holy somehow. A part of her recoiled at this, and she tried frantically to replace her satisfaction with guilt.

It was August when she yielded to his cries of indignation and allowed him to join the other cats for Sunday dinner. She wouldn't give him anything else, she promised herself, no breakfast drippings, no scraps. It was just once a week, and if she were stern, it shouldn't make much difference.

One evening in October as the days grew short and chilly, she found him lapping at her bourbon and 7-Up as she bustled around the kitchen.

She pushed him away firmly, but he came back again with a pleading mew, and this time she let him drink, smiling and shaking her head at the sight.

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When she picked up the drink to sip it herself, she was surprised to hear his plaintive, "Eeee-ooowm!"

"What?" she said, disapproving. "It's mine, dear, and you have no business drinking it anyway. It's not good for you."

"Eeee-hm! Eeee-hm!" said the tom, so clearly that she stood as if turned to salt.

Just this once, some part of her thought. He was like the cottage garden, like the children, like the saints. She knew how to please him, and it gave her great joy. She observed herself with horror as she set the glass down and let him lap from it again.

"What could it hurt?" she whispered, tears brimming over to cool her cheeks and blur the sight, while somewhere in her heart wine-yellow flowers of joy unfolded into bloom.

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The prolific Mr. Bailey seems to be equally comfortable with fantasy and with SF. In this new tale he ventures into the "if this goes on..." school of thought with an investigation of the real costs we'll have to pay for social security and our longer life spans. Don't look for any dollar signs on those real costs, however.

Exodus

By Dale Bailey

RUTH HADN'T BEEN SLEEPing the night through for decades, and on this morning — this special morning which she had been looking forward to for days and weeks and endless dragging months — she woke up even earlier than usual: in the cool silence of a May morning at precisely 3:57 according to the clock in her retinal implant. She lay still, inhaling the fresh lilac smell that drifted through the window from the commons while she decided whether she was still tired. She had noticed that as you got older, you craved sleep more but needed it less. Her practical solution to this paradox was to ignore the craving. Her body urged her to remain in her pleasant nest of sheets for another hour or two, but her good sense won out. Nothing could be more depressing than two sleepless hours in bed — especially on your 145th birthday.

So she stood and belted on the new robe Martha had sent her yesterday. Martha, her great-granddaughter, had mailed the robe from some eastern nation — Vietnam? Laos? Ruth had noticed the postmark

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and had carefully cut it out and put it on the refrigerator. A horrid colorful design like a viral culture infected the robe itself, but Ruth wore it anyway. She had not seen Martha in six years, had not spoken to her in three, had no idea what she was doing in Thailand. But it was nice to be remembered, wasn't it?

In the kitchen, she made coffee the old-fashioned way, ignoring the house's quiet offers of help. She had tried to convince maintenance to disable the whispery little voice, but she hadn't had any luck.

"We can't disconnect the house brain," the maintenance man had told her. "It's against regulations."

"I don't want you to disconnect the brain," Ruth had replied. "Just the voice."

The maintenance man shook his head. No doubt he nursed a grudge against seniors like herself. That would change when he came into his pensions — but it didn't solve her immediate problem.

He shook his head again. "The house brain has to be active in case there's an emergency," he told her. "What if you were to fall?"

Would that be so bad? Ruth thought.

She didn't say it aloud. Instead she submitted — and did her best to ignore the house's attempts to minister to her every whim. She knew some seniors who had fallen into that trap. She would do for herself, or she wouldn't do at all.

She turned on the wall as she sipped her coffee. The nets were all leading with the same stories: another bomb attack by the true agers, this one in Houston; continued orbital prep for the upcoming launch of the *Exodus*. Nothing she wanted to watch. She put on the rainforest scene instead and finished her coffee to images of bright extinct birds and foliage.

Ruth turned off the wall. She went back to the bedroom to make the bed, but she had forgotten to disable the housekeeping routine again; the house had already taken care of it. The tears started suddenly, the way they did sometimes, and Ruth didn't fight them. She let herself have a good cry there on the narrow bed; when the first gleam of gray light appeared at five, she said, "Stop being so foolish, you old woman." She forced a smile as she gazed in the mirror and started to get ready for her big day. Her 145th.

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Celia was coming. At last, at last, Celia was coming. The thought cheered her.

Celia arrived just after eleven. Ruth watched from the window as the car pulled up, a red-and-yellow one-day pass stuck under the windshield wiper, and then she turned for one last quick inspection of the house. She had left her coffee cup on an end table and she hurried it away into the kitchen, but otherwise everything looked spic and span. The chintz covers lay freshly ironed over the chairs, and the house had vacuumed itself. Tantalizing smells perfumed the air. The doorbell rang and rang and rang, but Ruth just stood in the living room and listened to it. It had been so long since she had seen Celia; she wanted to savor it a little.

"The doorbell is ringing," the house whispered, as if she couldn't hear it for herself.

"Well, open it." Ruth stepped forward, half-wanting to open the door herself — to be there waiting — but a sudden fit of shyness possessed her. What should she say? she wondered, but before she could decide, the house opened the door on its noiseless hinges, and there she was. Celia.

"Meemy!" Celia said, and Ruth said, "Celia! Honey, it's been too long!" Celia swept into the room in a gale of sound and motion. Packages and shopping bags fountained out of her arms — how could she carry so much? — and then they embraced, a long fierce embrace, simultaneously laughing and chattering like birds, without pause to listen. A thin bearded man came in behind her and closed the door gently.

"Gosh, it smells so good," Celia said.

"I've got home-made cobbler cooling in the kitchen. And Florence — next door? — she let me pick some flowers from her garden, so it would be nice for you. Wasn't that generous?"

Ruth took a deep breath and smiled. There was a brief, uncomfortable silence as they all looked at one another and smiled. The man, whoever he was — Celia hadn't asked to bring someone — stooped to gather the fallen shopping bags.

"Well," said Ruth, and she held Celia at arm's length. "Let me get a look at you."

"Let me get a look at *you!*" Celia laughed and turned to grin at the young man. "This is Ben," she said. "And this is Meemy — Ruth."

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Ben said something, but Ruth didn't hear him. Celia riveted her attention. Celia! she thought, and tears started up in her eyes again. She blinked them away so she could see Celia, who looked fine, better than fine. Celia looked terrific: tall and slim and draped in some shimmering black garb that seemed almost to float around her, defying gravity; her long face flush with excitement and her dark, angular eyes ashine. Celia, her great-great-granddaughter! Her dark hair, black as her clothes or blacker, and just shot through with a streak of gray, fell in a mass about her shoulders. And that smile. That hadn't changed if everything else had, if Celia had at last, at last, grown up. How old was Celia exactly? Thirty-five? Forty?

She said, "Oh, Celia, you look wonderful."

"Meemy! I'm trying to introduce you to someone!"

"Ben. Of course, Ben." Ruth smiled.

Ben took her hand. "It's a pleasure, Mrs. — "

"Ruth," Ruth said.

"It's a pleasure, Ruth. I've heard so much about you."

"Well, I haven't heard a thing about you."

"Oh, Meemy," Celia said.

"Sit down," Ruth told them. "I want to hear all about everything. Gosh, it's been so long, hasn't it? Seven years! You know," she said to Ben, "I practically raised Celia myself. Her mother — "

"Do we have to talk about Mother?" Celia said. She sat down beside her young man — her Ben — in the loveseat by the window. Ruth stood at the door into the kitchen and gazed back at them, this slim bearded young man with the intense eyes and her great-great-granddaughter, more like a daughter, like her very own child. Celia had draped her hand casually over Ben's shoulder, and she was staring at Ruth with an expectant expression on her face. But Ruth didn't know what to say. She could hardly think. Spring sunlight, bright against the grassy commons, dazzled her. Maybe the implants had malfunctioned, she thought, and then she blinked and felt tears. My, but she cried easily today. She turned her head before Celia noticed, vowing not to cry. How absurd.

She said, "Let me get you something to drink. I have coffee and soda and I think there may be some tea — "

"Sit down, Meemy. We're not thirsty."

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"No, let me," Ruth said. "Coffee, Ben?"

"That would be fine," he said. "Sugar if you have it."

"Meemy — "

Ruth disappeared into the kitchen. She paused, looking out through the kitchen window into Florence's garden as she blinked away the last of the tears. The flowers had erupted into riotous bloom, and it was nice just to stand there and inhale the heady scent of them through the open window while she calmed herself.

"Meemy, what's wrong?"

Ruth switched on the water and made as though she were washing the mug in the sink. "Nothing, dear. I just needed a clean cup."

"Nonsense." Celia lit a cigarette and moved past Ruth to peer out the window. "Someone sure has a way with flowers," she said. "I'm going to miss them."

"It's a nasty habit, smoking."

"It's just a style, Meemy. It doesn't hurt you."

"Cigarettes make your clothes stink."

"Maybe I'll quit."

"Who's talking nonsense? You've smoked since you were sixteen. What's that — twenty-five years now?"

"Twenty-two." Celia ran water over her cigarette. The sunlight loved her. It made her skin almost translucent. It made her hair darker and turned the gray streak blonde.

"You shouldn't leave your friend out there," Ruth said. "It's not polite."

"Who's not being polite?" She watched Ruth fumble with the coffee pot. "Let the house make the coffee," she said. "We don't get to see each other often. Let's take advantage of it."

"I'm done." Ruth placed sugar, mugs, and the warming pot on a silver serving tray, hastily arranged a box of cakes in a semi-circle around one edge, and walked into the living room. Celia followed.

"You have to tell me all about yourself," Ruth said to Ben. "I want to know everything." She saw a quick glance pass between them.

Ben stirred sugar into his coffee. A breeze billowed the filmy curtains and brought the smell of the coffee to her nostrils. "Celia and I met at CelTech," Ben said.

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"CelTech," Ruth said. "Such a big company. I wish I could understand what you do, Celia." She said to Ben, "It's so technical, you know."

"We worked together on a project there," Ben said. "I'm a mechanical engineer."

"You don't say! Perhaps you could help me. I've been trying to get maintenance to turn off the house voice, and they refuse to do it. Could you do something like that?"

"Meemy, please."

"It wouldn't be a good idea to disable the house brain," Ben said. "What if you fell?"

"Not the brain. Only the voice."

"Please, Meemy. This is a visit. It's your birthday. Don't you want to see your presents? We have lots of them."

Ben placed his hand on Celia's thigh. "I could do that," he said. "Maybe that's a good idea. It would give you two some time to talk."

"Yes," said Ruth, "Let's go for a walk, Celia."

THEY WALKED, sunlight warm against their shoulders. A robin twittered in the big oak, and the scents of fecund, growing things hung resonant in the air. It was possible, if you didn't look hard enough, to imagine that you had stepped out of this day and year into the simple bucolic world Ruth had known as a girl. But then something always happened to shatter the illusion. You saw a needle plane slide silently across the skyline, or you noticed that the park was full of seniors — seniors digging in the little gardens that bordered the commons, seniors walking arm in arm across the grass, seniors chatting on the porches of the whitewashed cottages under the trees.

Ruth took Celia's arm proudly. She guided her on a circuitous route among the cottages and introduced her to everyone she knew, which was everyone.

Celia smoked and didn't talk. After a while, she said, "Let's take a look at the wall."

Ruth sighed. "Tell me about your young man. Ben."

"He's nice, isn't he? I like him."

"Well, he's handsome I suppose. How long have you known each other?"

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"Oh, I don't know. Six months? Seven?"

"I would know that if you called once in a while. You haven't called in almost a year, Celia."

"I'm sorry," Celia said. "I — I don't know, Meemy. Just busy, you know."

"Too busy to return my calls?"

"Busy." Celia knelt to grind out her cigarette against a stone. She slid the butt into a pocket of the black wrap. "It wasn't intentional, you know."

Ruth didn't say anything. They had gone past the last of the cottages and the shopping center that bordered one edge of the commons. They walked down a narrow paved lane overhung with trees.

"I'm glad I wrote and asked you to come today," Ruth said. "I'm glad you decided to come. I've missed you. I was afraid you were going to abandon me, like Martha."

"Mother hasn't turned out so bad. You don't really know her, Meemy."

"And you do?"

"Yes, I do," said Celia icily.

They had reached the wall, thirteen feet of granite so overgrown with ivy that it was virtually invisible. "We'd like to look out," Ruth told the guard at the gate, and he waved them on. They mounted a stone staircase with a black iron railing, and stood atop the wall, looking out over the gray city.

"Did she remember your birthday this year?" Celia asked.

"She sent me a robe. From Laos. What's she doing there?"

"Thailand," Celia said. "She's in Thailand, working on land reclamation. It's good work. Important work."

"Does it pay well?"

"Nothing pays well, Meemy. Not these days."

They were silent for a moment. The breeze started up and came over the wall in a soft pleasant wave. It lifted Celia's hair. Ruth wanted to touch her again. Ruth wanted to embrace her, but Celia stood aloof, her hands tucked in the folds of her wrap, locked inside herself.

"Mother didn't abandon you," Celia said.

"Well, I don't know what else you would call it."

"She doesn't approve of you."

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"Approve of me?"

"This life," Celia said. "The way you live here."

"Well, I've earned it. I've worked hard all my life. I deserve this. Your mother's pensions will come, too."

Celia turned away, mumbling.

"What did you say?" Ruth asked. "I didn't hear you."

"Nothing."

They were quiet for a time.

"I'm glad you got to know your mother," Ruth said at last. It was hard for her to say.

Celia smiled. "Me too."

They turned and went down the stairs, and started back along the road to the commons. The guard nodded at them, but didn't speak. The sky looked clear blue and faraway with warmth, and the trees whispered among themselves in foreign voices. Ruth hardly noticed. It wasn't supposed to be this way, she thought, this reunion with Celia. She longed for that special bond they had shared when Celia was a girl, before Ruth came into her pensions and moved to the compound. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

"I'm sorry I'm being such a bitch," Celia said.

Ruth didn't answer. What could she say?

During supper Celia acted like her old self, chattering about nothing and everything, her angular features animated with delight. She drew Ben into the conversation and the awkwardness among them seemed to evaporate. Ruth thought he seemed like a nice young man; she didn't mind that Celia had brought him. It was pleasant to have young people in the house, to have Celia home at last after she had been gone so many years. What happened to the years?

After they finished the cobbler, Celia brought out the presents. The bags seemed bottomless. Celia plucked out box after colorfully wrapped box, and Ruth opened them with nervous fingers, saying, "You shouldn't have, honey. How are you going to pay for all this?"

"Don't worry," Celia said.

So Ruth didn't. Just once, she thought, I will allow myself to enjoy. And she did. It was her best birthday in years — in decades — and by the

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time they finished with the packages and took their coffee to the porch, it had begun to turn dark.

They sat quiet for a time. Ruth found it a comfortable kind of silence; she was glad they had come.

"Beautiful night," Ben said.

"Mmmm," said Celia. "Miss this." She tilted her head against Ben's shoulder. The porch swing drifted with her movement, the springs whining softly, and Ruth, sitting in the rocker, felt a touch of envy. Just children, really.

A sprinkle of stars glimmered above them. The crickets started up. The sound of them soothed her, and her girlhood in Kentucky came flying back to her: she remembered sitting on the porch of her father's house, her head tilted against some boy's shoulder just like Celia's was, wishing on a star. There had been such places, then. Front porches and lots of open country.

Ben said, "See that red star?" He pointed through the net of lilac branches at the sky.

"I see it," Celia said.

Ruth gazed up. Her vision blurred for a moment as the retinal implant drew its focus, and then she saw it: a red star in the sky a million years away.

"That's not a star," Ben said.

"Mars?" Ruth said.

"That's the jumpship," he said. "The *Exodus*."

Silence, then, the three of them rocking.

"People going a long, long way from here," Ruth said. "I don't know that I approve."

"People have to have room to live," Ben said. "People have to live for themselves. They can't always be working to pay some senior's way."

"That kind of talk sounds like true ager nonsense to me," Ruth said. "That kind of talk leads to these bombings you hear about. I saw one just this morning. Some crazy folks bombed a senior compound in Houston. People need to be patient, their pensions will come."

"Yes," said Ben, "and who will pay for them?"

Ruth glared up at the red light as if she could wipe it from the heavens by sheer force of will. "There are always more young folks," she said.

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"Not as many as there are seniors. Fewer young people all the time, and more and more seniors every day."

"Well, what should we do? Just die?"

Ben started to speak, but Celia said, "Ben," and he fell silent. Ruth could just see the shape of him in the dark, but she didn't have to see more. She knew what kind of man he was; she had heard such arguments before, and she resented them. She had worked hard all her life without complaint and this was her reward. This place, with its flowers and its trees like you could find nowhere else in the world anymore. She had earned this. She deserved it. She would not listen to someone who wanted to take it away from her.

Then a chill little wave of anxiety crested within her. She thought of how she had been looking forward to this day. This is Celia's friend, she told herself. This is the man Celia loves. And partly to make amends, but mostly because she liked the sound of them, their presence here in her home, she said, "Why don't you stay the night? I could call the gate and have them issue you a night pass."

"You haven't told her, have you?" said Ben.

Ruth stopped rocking. She sat very still. "Told me what?" she said. "What haven't you told me, Celia? I want to know."

"We can't stay, Meemy," she said. "We have to be at the suborbital in Denver in the morning."

"The suborbital? I don't understand."

"We're going away," Celia said.

"Going away?"

Celia started to speak and fell silent. Ben shifted in the swing, ill at ease. After a moment, Ruth said, "You mean a vacation, right?"

"No," said Celia. "It's — "

"The jumpship," Ben said. "We made the final cut for the *Exodus*. We check in tomorrow at the LaGrange Station for some final tests, but ..." He shrugged.

"But why?" Ruth asked, and she could hear the note of desperation in her voice. She didn't want it to be there, but she couldn't help it. She could feel it bubbling up inside her, the loneliness and the desperation. She could not stop it, she could not keep it from her voice. It kept her up at night.

"Don't be upset, Meemy — "

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"Don't be upset! When you just show up here to tell me that you're leaving forever? How could I not be upset?"

"You have to understand," Celia said. "There's no room for us here. You slave all your life to make pensions, just so you can have a few decades of pleasure at the end. We won't be able to afford pensions forever, Meemy, not at this rate. We have to get away, build a new life."

"It's no way to live, the way we have to live," Ben said.

"I didn't want to have to tell you," Celia said. "But I couldn't do that, Meemy. I had to say good-bye."

"But that ship — it won't arrive for a hundred years or more. They don't even know where they're going. They're just...going. What kind of life is that?"

"A better life," Ben said. "A better life for our children if we're lucky."

"It's a grand adventure," Celia said.

"And you came here to tell me this? On my birthday?"

Now it all made sense to her. The way Celia had been behaving all day, the little things she had said. *I'm going to miss them,* she had said of the flowers that blazed in Florence's garden. She had said it again just now, hadn't she? And the presents.

"So you're leaving me? Like your mother, is that it?"

"No, Meemy — "

"And you think you can buy my forgiveness with all your presents? Like I'm too dumb or too old to even understand?"

"No — "

"Well, it won't work," Ruth said, standing. "You've ruined everything, do you hear? Everything. And I won't forgive you that."

She turned and went inside and closed the door behind her. "Lock the door," she said to the house, and she heard the mechanism slide into place behind her.

She was crying. She hadn't meant to cry.

"Meemy?" Celia said through the door. "Please don't let it end this way. Please let us say good-bye."

"Open up, Ruth," Ben said. "Be reasonable."

"Go away, I don't care if I ever speak to you again."

"Meemy, please — "

But she wouldn't answer. They could call all night and she wouldn't answer. All of them, all of them had abandoned her. First her sons. And

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then Martha. And Celia last of all. It wasn't her fault. She wouldn't answer. She would not answer.

"Meemy, please, you have to listen."

But she didn't. She sat in the dark house and wept. They called for a long time before she heard the car start. She went to the window and watched the red taillights dwindle through the trees, like the red light in the sky which Ben had pointed out. Like the jumpship, the *Exodus*. Then she went back to the sofa and sat down. No one said a word, not even the house.

THE CALL CAME through after midnight, coded emergency, but Ruth had silenced the wall and didn't hear it. She woke at 3:07, the bedroom wall pulsing with the pink hue of the emergency beacon. The house brain was programmed to override the silence order in an emergency, but it had failed.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she said to the house.

The house didn't answer, and then Ruth remembered: she had asked Ben to disable the voice.

She felt sluggish, entombed in silence.

"Play the message," she said. The wall dissolved into static. When it cleared, Celia became visible, her face pale and drawn and abnormally elongated by the transmission. "You have a connection," a neutral machine voice said, and Celia looked up.

"Meemy?" she said. She waited a moment and Ruth studied the image. Crowds drifted along a concourse behind Celia. "Meemy, if you're there, please pick up."

She waited a moment longer, her expression hopeful, and then she said, "I don't know what to say to you, but I can't leave it like this. I love you, Meemy, and I understand that you're upset. But you have to understand as well."

Celia paused, and fumbled in her wrap for a cigarette. She exhaled and listened to someone off-screen.

"That's Ben," she said. "We have to hurry. He really liked you, you know. I wanted you to know that. Listen, you have to understand, it's important that you do." She smoked for a moment, and then she said, "We're hungry for something Earth can't give us, Ben and me, lots of

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people. We're tired of working all the time and seeing everything we've worked for drained away for other people. I suppose it's hard to understand for you — you have everything there in your little world — but people are suffering and starving. There are too many of us, and too many of us are old. But that doesn't mean I don't love you. That doesn't mean I won't be thinking of you. Because I will be."

She glanced offscreen again. "We've got to go," she said. "Remember me, Meemy." She reached out to the screen and the image dissolved into static once again.

"Save message," Ruth said to the house.

The wall went dark.

Ruth could not get back to sleep. After a while, she got up and wrapped herself in Martha's robe and went into the kitchen for coffee. When the horizon began to turn gray, she found herself gazing at Florence's garden. *I'm going to miss them,* Celia had said, speaking of flowers. Ruth tried to imagine a world so devoid of hope that you could willingly leave flowers behind. That was the world Celia lived in, she thought. The world most people lived in.

It was the world she lived in, too, but she had been too blind to see it.

Now she did. Fifteen years she had lived here — fifteen years of chatting with Florence over the flowers, fifteen years of evening walks through the commons, fifteen years of bridge and checkers and Thursday night dances. Fifteen years of sudden tears for no reason she could understand. Fifteen endless years.

She might have two decades more.

She turned on the wall and watched the news nets for a while. Still another attack by the true-agers; grim footage of slums in Bangladesh; more currency troubles in Brazil.

People are suffering, Celia had said. And it was true.

But not the seniors; they had the best of everything.

We paid for it, she thought. We worked long and hard without complaint, and this is our reward.

But now such reasoning sounded hollow even to her. This is our reward: puttering amongst flowers, bridge, sudden inexplicable fits of tears. Fifteen years of selfish, ugly bliss while our children and children's children suffered.

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She asked the wall to find Martha's number. Martha hadn't called in three years, she thought. But neither had she called Martha.

THREE NIGHTS LATER she tried to get through to Celia at the LaGrange Station. After almost an hour, she found a station receptionist who could spare her a moment.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, when she had explained what she wanted to do. He was very young. "The last of the group boarded this morning."

"Can I reach them on the *Exodus*?"

"No, ma'am, that's impossible. I'm sorry." He reached out to cut the connection.

"Just a minute, please," she said.

He blinked at her.

"Can you get them a message?"

"I don't think so, ma'am. There are nearly a thousand people on that ship. Things are pretty hectic over there. The departure window opens in twelve hours — "

"Please," she said.

He paused, and gazed at her quizzically for a moment.

"It's important," she said. "I didn't get a chance to say good-bye."

"Fine, then." He reached for a keypad. "Names?"

"Celia, Celia Fisher. And Ben. Ben someone."

"And your message?"

"Tell them — tell them, I'm sorry. I understand now. Tell them I wish them the best."

"Fine."

"It's important," she said.

"I'll do what I can."

The wall went dark. Ruth ordered up the rainforest, but after a moment she switched it off. You couldn't tell the bright extinct birds and trees from the real thing, the animation was so accomplished, but you knew anyway. That was bad enough.

One last time she walked through the house. Most of her possessions had been boxed up for auction. She went out to the porch where her single suitcase waited. She searched the skies for the red glimmer,

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and when she found it, she gazed up at it and thought: That's one solution. There must be others.

The cab pulled up outside. Ruth had imagined that the car would be automated, but to her surprise the door opened and a human driver stepped out. Then it came to her. There are too many of us, she thought. People have to work. People have to have something to do.

The driver loaded her suitcase in the trunk and opened the back door for her.

"I think I'll sit in the front with you," she said.

"Whatever you say. The suborbital in Denver?"

"That's right."

They drove down the wooded lane to the gate. Outside, beneath the street lights, the city sprawled barren and ugly. Here and there a blade of grass poked through a crack in the pavement. A few young people moved along the sidewalks, but mostly it was deserted.

"Not often one of you folks leaves the compound," he said.

Ruth smiled.

"Where are you going?"

"Thailand, of all places. Isn't that absurd?" She laughed. "I have work to do there."

"Work?"

"That's right."

The driver shook his head. "Not me. When I come into my pensions, I'm going to sit back and enjoy them, you know?"

"I suppose," said Ruth. She leaned forward and gazed for a long moment at the red beacon of the *Exodus*, glimmering there among all the thousand stars. Good-bye, Celia, she thought. Good-bye, Ben. Good luck. And then she turned to her driver. She said, "But you never know, do you?"

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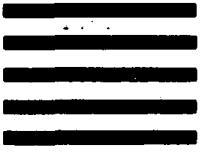

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Narrative Contents May Have Settled During Shipment

"In September, [they] will launch a line of children's books, with titles like *Bernie Drives a Tractor*, available only through Shaw's supermarkets. 'We don't pretend we're Doubleday,' said Shaw's spokesman Bernard Rogin, 'but we're serious about our private label. As good as the national brand is our mantra.'" —Paul Davis, "Food for Thought," *The Providence Journal-Bulletin.*

A *HISTORY of Supermarket Fiction: How SF Swept the World*, by Roger Bernard, Procter and Gamble, available in Mini, Personal, Regular, Large, or Jumbo Economy packages, priced variously from $0.99 upward, depending on contents, with applicable coupons (no doubling, please), sales, promotions or discounts. Consult label directory for list of narrators. Running time approximately one oil change, ten breakfasts, twelve showers, or one hundred applications of deodorant. Free samples in Aisle Twenty-one of most P&G-affiliated stores. External use only.

To fully appreciate this new monumental history of a phenomenon now taken utterly for granted, it is necessary to travel back in time to the period when SF was born. Deeply cognizant of this necessity, author Bernard devotes *the entire first fifteen minutes* of his long-running package to a synopsis of the historical condition of literature several decades ago. I'm sure most consumers will find it as fascinating as I did.

At that time, many seemingly independent factors were conspiring to assassinate literature in book form (as it had existed for previous centuries). None were insurmountable or had primacy, yet together they spelled doom for the printed word.

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The populace at large, thanks to failed schooling, was becoming less capable of reading. Shortened attention spans, fostered by various twentieth-century stimuli, disinclined people to sit quietly for long stretches with a book.

Dinosaur-sized book-retailers squashed their small, individualistic competitors, inadvertently breeding a uniformity of product and atmosphere repellent to all but the most dim-witted customers, who were drawn in by the chummy social scene and a comforting assortment of book-oriented *tchochtkes*.

The bottom-line, blockbuster mentality of the megacorporations which controlled publishers created a geriatric cadre of "proven" yet rapidly staling brand-name writers, supplemented by the occasional market-tested "fresh voice."

The environmental impact of old-fashioned book production — with its insatiable demand for paper and its freight costs — could no longer be ignored.

Finally, glossy new computer technologies — the Worldwide Web, CD-ROM multimedia, hypertext — began to lure the more adventurous readers and writers away from ink on paper.

Unseen by most people at the time, as Bernard deftly illustrates, was another whole set of factors which would lead to the invention of SF.

One of the few growth areas in publishing at the time was that of audio books. It was obvious that an increasingly busy citizenry preferred to be read to while on the go. A diminishing resistance to corporate sponsorship of recreational events — rock concerts, sporting events, celebrity trials — was a second converging trend. One subtle version of this was "product placement," a tactic which inserted brand-name icons into prominent roles in movies and books, stadiums and courtrooms. Lastly, the marketing of books in odd and unexpected places — supermarkets, airports, discount chains, salvage stores — began to accustom people to impulse purchases of reading material in unfamiliar settings.

But the final catalyst for the formation of SF was — inevitably, as with so many other modern advances — a new technology. As miniaturization crossed the barrier into nano-structures, it became possible to create what came to be known as CDM: Cheap Dimensionless Memory, a spray-application, self-patterning circuitry.

The uses for CDM were mani-

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fold and practically inexhaustible. But the one that concerns Bernard here was CDM's use in packaging. Every product under the sun became encased in interactive, audio-visual spray-on labeling. So great was the capacity of CDM for information that manufacturers soon ran out of advertising content! It was only natural, then, for them to begin attempting to lure consumers to their products by including samples of interesting material drawn from other sources. Arrangements with cash-hungry book publishers, record companies, and movie studios were soon cemented.

These latter two groups never really moved beyond their initial relationship: providing snippets of their licensed entertainment content for use by novelty-seeking manufacturers seeking to catch the eyes of consumers by standing out on the crowded, noisy, flashy shelves. The distribution channels and usage-patterns for music and cinema were already digital, efficient, and well-established. But with book-publishers, it was a different matter entirely. This new medium offered everything they had previously been lacking.

To fill the intelligent label of every box, can, dispenser, jar, carton, tray, bag, tin, sack, cellopack, pump, and aerosol with an entire novel, collection of short stories, or non-fiction work (all of them abridged for modern tastes, of course) was only a small jump in both cost and intention.

Within two years of the release of CDM, "books" were dead, except as a rare handicraft.

But Supermarket Fiction had been born.

Now, for the first time, instead of the consumer reading the cereal box at breakfast the box could read to the consumer!

Although much continued as before (authors still received their advances from the combined operating capital of the victuallers and retailers, charged against their penny-per-unit-sold royalties; *Consumer Reports* added the famous Panel of Five literary critics to their staff), the whole world of literature was changed. A congruence between certain types of literature and the products which they adorned led to the creation of entirely new forms of story-telling.

Cereal serials became the prime vehicle for juvenile literature, ensuring the rapt attention of formerly rambunctious youngsters in the morning and after school. Romances on shampoo bottles became truly steamy, with their climaxes hosted

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separately — and appropriately — on either Kleenex boxes or champagne bottles. (Pornography, of course, eagerly made the transition to the new era, sprayed onto a host of obscenely crafted or misused innocent objects like whipped cream.) Diet guides were incorporated into healthy products — a case of preaching to the converted, as Bernard notes. Minimalist novels were popular on springwater bottles, while the maximalists occupied extra-thick, extra-rich comestibles. Mysteries found a home on any poisonous cleaning product, and science fiction eked out a niche on candybars and soda bottles, of all places.

Perhaps the most curious incident which Bernard cleverly recounts is the short-lived fad of "sixpack sensationalism." Featured exclusively on malt liquor cans, these fictions were formulaic in the extreme. Starting out on the can numbered "one," they were intended to be consumed by lonely individuals at a single boozy sitting. The generic plot — such as it was — usually involved elaborate revenges enacted upon all those (boss, girlfriend, politician) who had slighted or offended the protagonist.

But all these later moments of Bernard's opus — the names of best-selling writers and forgotten cult authors and the products they were inextricably associated with; the trends and scandals (who can forget the botulism incident that ruined so many careers?); the legislation that finally put an expiration date on SF, so that landfills were not full of ghostly voices — will be mostly familiar to the modern consumer, and I must confess that I found my attention wandering, despite a profusion of soundbites and filmclips. Ultimately, it is in its presentation of historical context that this product will most appeal to the consumer.

I myself consumed Bernard's book in its drain-cleaner package, and it performed quite efficiently in unclogging my plumbing.

Be a responsible consumer: please dispose of this used review properly.

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Adam-Troy Castro's first story was a powerhouse tale called "Clearance to Land" that appeared in Pulphouse *in 1989. Since then we have had the pleasure of publishing many of his tales, but nothing from the past will prepare you for this knockout novella about a strange alien ritual and the one woman who understands it.*

The Funeral March of the Marionettes

By Adam-Troy Castro

1.

IT WAS IN THE THIRD YEAR of my indentured servitude that I rescued Isadora from the death-dance of the Marionettes.

This happened on Vlhan, a temperate world of no strategic importance to either the Terran Confederacy or any of the great offworld republics. An unremarkable place with soft rolling hills, swampy lowlands, and seasons that came and went too gently for anybody to notice the change, it was indistinguishable from a million similar worlds throughout the known universe, and it would have been charted, abandoned, and forgotten were it not for the Vlhani themselves; they were so different from every other sentience in the universe that seven separate republics and confederacies maintained outposts there just to study them. Because the Vlhani had been declared sentient, we called our outposts embassies instead of research stations, and ourselves diplomats instead of scientists, but almost nothing we did involved matters of state; we were so removed

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from real power that the idea of a genuine diplomatic incident — let alone a war — seemed a universe away.

My name was Alex Gordon then. On Vlhan, I was a twenty-two-year old exolinguist, born and raised in the wheelworld known as New Kansas; the kind of bookish young man who insists he dreams of visiting the real Kansas someday even after being told how long it's been uninhabitable. Like the three dozen other indentures who made up the rest of our delegation, I'd bartered five years of service in exchange for a lifetime of free travel throughout the Confederacy; but I'd been so captivated by the mysteries of the Vlhani people that I seriously considered devoting my entire life to finding the choreographic Rosetta Stone that would finally make sense of their dance. For it was the Ballet that, once every sixteen standard lunars, made them the center of attention on a thousand worlds. It was simultaneously tragedy, art form, suicide, orgasm, biological imperative and mob insanity. The first time I saw it I was shattered; the second time I wept; the third....

But this story's about the third.

The one that belonged to Isadora.

2.

It was a warm, sunny day, with almost no breeze. We'd erected a viewing stand overlooking the great natural amphitheater, and installed the usual holo and neurec remotes to record the festivities for future distribution. As was customary, we gathered on the north rim, the assembled Vlhani spectators on the south. I sat among the mingled human and alien diplomats, along with ambassador Hai Dhiju, and my fellow indentures. Kathy Ng was there, making her usual sardonic comments about everything; as was our quartermaster Rory Metcalf, who talked gossip and politics and literature and everything but the spectacle unfolding before us; and Dhiju's sycophantic assistant Oskar Levine, who waxed maudlin on his own personal interpretation of the dance. We were all excited by the magic we were about to witness, but also bored, in the way that audiences tend to be in the last few minutes before any show; and as we murmured among ourselves, catching up on gossip and politics and the latest news from our respective worlds, few of us dwelled on the

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knowledge that all of the one hundred thousand Vlhani in the bowl itself were here to die.

Hurrr'poth did. He was my counterpart from the Riirgaan delegation: a master exolinguist among a reptilian race that prided itself on its exolinguists. He usually liked to sit among the other delegations rather than sequester himself among his own people; and this year he'd chosen to sit beside me, which had a chilling effect on my conversations with anybody else. Like all Riirgaans, he had a blank, inexpressive face, impossible to read (a probable reason why they'd had to develop such uncanny verbal communication skills), and when he said, "We are all criminals," I was uncertain just how to take it.

"Why? Because we sit back and let it happen?"

"Of course not. The Vlhani perform this ritual because they feel they have to; it would be immensely arrogant of us to stop it. We are correct in allowing their orgy of self-destruction. No, we are criminal because we enjoy it; because we find beauty in it; because we openly look forward to the day when they gather here to die. We are not innocent bystanders. We are accomplices."

I indicated the neurecs focused on the amphitheater, for the benefit of future vicarious spectators. "And pornographers."

Hurrr'poth trilled, in his race's musical equivalent of laughter. "Exactly."

"If you disapprove of it so much, then why do you watch?"

He trilled again. "Because I am as great a criminal as any one of you. Because the Vlhani are masterpieces of form following function, and because I find them magnificent, and because I believe the Ballet to be one of the most beautiful sights in a universe that is already not lacking for beauty. Indeed, I believe that much of the Ballet's seductive power lies in how it indicts us, as spectators...and if I must be indicted for the Ballet to be a complete work, then I happily accept my guilt as one of the prices of admission. What about you? Why do you watch?"

I spoke cautiously, as lower-echelon diplomats must whenever posed sufficiently uncomfortable questions. "To understand."

"Ahhhh. And what do you want to understand? Yourself, or the Vlhani?"

"Both," I said — glibly, but accurately — and then hurriedly peered

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through my rangeviewers as a quick way of escaping the conversation. It wasn't that I disliked Hurrr'poth; it was that his manner of cutting to the heart had always made me uncomfortable. Riirgaans had a way of knowing the people they spoke to better than they knew themselves, which may have been one reason they were so far ahead of us in decoding the danced language of the Vlhani. We could only ask childlike questions and understand simple answers. The Riirgaans had progressed to discussing intangibles. Even now, much of our research on the Vlhani had to be conducted with Riirgaan aid, and usually succeeded only in uncovering details they'd known for years.

This rankled those of us who liked to be first in everything; me, I just thought we'd accomplish more by cooperating. Maybe the Riirgaans just enjoyed watching others figure things out for themselves. Who knows? If the thriving market in Vlhani Ballet recordings means anything at all, it's that sentient creatures are subject to strange, unpredictable passions...and that the Vlhani are plugged into all of them.

A wind whipped up the loose dirt around the periphery of the amphitheater. The Vlhani spectators on the far rim stirred in anticipation. The one hundred thousand Vlhani in the amphitheater mingled about, in that seemingly random manner that we knew to be carefully choreographed. Our instruments recorded the movements of each and every Vlhani, to determine the many subtle ways in which tonight's performance differed from last year's; I merely panned my rangeviewer from one end of the amphitheater to the other, content to be awed by the numbers.

Vlhani have been compared to giant spiders, mostly by people with an Earthbound vocabulary, and I suppose that's fair enough, if you want a description that completely robs the Vhani of everything that renders them unique. Personally, I much prefer to think of them as Marionettes. Imagine a shiny black sphere roughly one meter across, so smooth it looks metallic, so flawless it looks manufactured, its only concession to the messy biological requirements of ingestion, elimination, copulation and procreation a series of almost-invisible slits cut along one side. That's the Vlhani head. Now imagine anywhere between eight and twenty-four shiny black tentacles attached to various places around that head. Those are Vlhani whips, which can grow up to thirty meters long and which for

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both dexterity and versatility put humanity's poor opposable thumb to shame. A busy Vlhani can simultaneously a) stick one whip in the dirt, and render it rigid as a flagpole, to anchor itself while occupied with other things; b) use another four whips to carve itself a shelter out of the local raw materials; c) use another three whips to spear the underbrush for the rodentlike creatures it likes to eat; d) flail the rest of its whips in the air above its head, in the sophisticated wave-form sign language that Vlhani can use to conduct as many as six separate conversations at once. Even a single Vlhani, going about its everyday business, is a beautiful thing; one hundred thousand Vlhani, gathered together to perform the carefully choreographed Ballet that is both their holiest rite and most revered art form, are too much spectacle for any human mind to absorb properly at one time.

And too much tragedy too. For the one hundred thousand Vlhani gathered in that great amphitheater would soon dance without rest, without restraint, without nourishment or sleep; they'd dance until their self-control failed, and their whips carved slices from each other's flesh; they'd dance until their hearts burst and the amphitheater was left filled with corpses. The ritual took place once each revolution of their world around their sun, and no offworlder claimed to understand it, not even the Riirgaans. But we knew it was some kind of art form, and that it possessed a tragic beauty that transcended the bounds of species.

Hurrr'poth said, "They are starting late, this year. I wonder if — "

I took a single, sharp, horrified intake of breath. "Oh, God. No."

"What?"

I zoomed in, saw it again, and shouted: "AMBASSADOR!"

Hai Dhiju, who was seated two rows away, whirled in astonishment; we may have been an informal group on Vlhan, but my shout was still an incredible breach of protocol. He might have taken it a little better if he weren't intoxicated from the mild hallucinogens he took every day — they left him able to function, but always a little slow. As it was, his eyes narrowed for the second it took him to remember my name. "Alex. What's wrong?"

"There's a woman down there! With the Vlhani!"

It wasn't a good idea to yell it in a crowd. Cries of "What?" and "Where?" erupted all around us. The alien reactions ranged from stunned

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silence, on the part of my friend Hurrr'poth, to high-pitched, ear-piercing hoots, on the part of the high-strung Ialos and K'cenhowten. A few of the aliens actually got up and rushed the transparent barriers, as if inspired by one insane, suicidal Terran to join the unknown woman in that bowl where soon nothing would be left alive.

Dhiju demanded, "Where?"

I handed him my rangeviewer. "It's marked."

He followed the blinking arrows on the interior screen to the flagged location. All around us, spectators slaved their own rangeviewers to the same signal. When they spotted her, their gasps were in close concert with his.

I wasn't looking through a rangeviewer at that moment; I didn't see the same thing the others saw. My own glimpse had been of a lithe and beautiful young woman in a black leotard, with short-cropped black hair and unfamiliar striped markings on both cheeks. Her eyes had burned bright with some emotion that I would have mistaken for fear, were it not for the impossibly level grace with which she walked. She couldn't have been older than her early twenties. Just about everybody who saw her the same moment the ambassador did now claims to have noticed more: an odd resonance to the way she moved her arms...

Maybe. Neither the ambassador nor anybody else around us commented on it at the time. Dhiju was just shocked enough to find the core of sobriety somewhere inside him. "Oh, God. Who the hell — Alex, you saw her first, you get to man the skimmer that plucks her the hell out of there. Hurry!"

"But what if — "

"If the Ballet starts, you're to abort immediately and let the universe exact the usual fine for idiocy. Until then — run!"

I could have hesitated, even refused. Instead, I whirled, and began to fight my way through the crowd, an act that was taken by most of those watching as either a testament to my natural courage under fire, or a demonstration of Dhiju's natural ability to command. The more I look back, and remember my first glimpse of Isadora, the more I think that it might have been her that drew me.

Maybe part of me was in love with her even then.

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3.

I was free of the crowd and halfway to the skimmer before I noticed Hurrr'poth running alongside me, his triple-segmented legs easily keeping up with my less-than-athletic gait. He boarded the vehicle even as I did. He anticipated the inevitable question: "You need me. Take off."

My official answer should have been that this was a human matter and that I was not authorized to take any liberties with his safety. But he was right. He had years more experience with the Vlhani; he possessed more understanding of their language. If nothing else, he was my best chance for getting out alive myself.

So I just said, "All right," and took off, circling around the rear of the viewing platform and then coming in as low over the amphitheater as I dared. Once I was over the Vlhani I slaved the skimmer to my rangeviewer and had it home in on the woman. Thousands of shiny spherical black heads rotated to follow our progress; though a few recoiled, many more merely snapped their whips our way, as if attempting to seize us in flight. The average whip-span of a grown Marionette being what it was, they came close.

He peered over the side as we flew. "We don't have much time, Alex; they're all initiating their Primary Ascension."

I was clipping on a Riirgaani-patented whip harness. "I don't know what that means, Hurrr'poth."

"It's what we call one of the earliest parts of the dance, where they gather their energies and synchronize their movements. You would probably call it a rehearsal, or a tune-up, but it's apparently as fraught with meaning as anything that follows; unfortunately, it doesn't last very long, and it tends to be marked by sudden, unpredictable activity." After a pause, he said: "Your flyby is causing some interesting...I would say clumsy and perhaps even...desperate variations."

"Wonderful." The last thing I needed was to be known all my life as the man who disrupted the Vlhani Ballet. "Do you see her yet?"

"I've never lost sight of her," Hurrr'poth said calmly.

A few seconds later I spotted her myself. She was...well, the best possible word for her walk is, undulating...down the slope on the far side of the amphitheater, into the deepest concentrations of Vlhani. She was

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waving both of her long slender arms over her head, in a gesture that initially struck me as an attempt to catch my attention but almost immediately made itself clear as an attempt to duplicate the movements of the Vlhani. She moved like a woman fluent in the language, who not only knew precisely what she was saying but also had the physical equipment she needed to say it: all four limbs were so limber that they could have been Vlhani whips and not human arms and legs. One of the first things I saw her do was loop each of her arms all the way around her other one, not just once but half a dozen times, forming a double helix.

"Jesus," I said, as we descended toward her. "She's been enhanced."

"At the very least," agreed Hurrr'poth.

Her arms untangled, became jagged cartoon-lightning, then rose over her head again, waggling almost comically as little parentheses-shapes moved from wrist to shoulder in waves. As we came to a hovering stop three meters ahead of her, she scowled, an expression that made the scarlet chevrons tattooed on each cheek move closer to her dark penetrating eyes. Then she lowered her gaze and retreated.

"Leave her be," said Hurrr'poth.

I stared at him. "She'll die."

"So will all these others. It's why they're here, and why she's here. If you save her, you'll be disturbing the Ballet for no good reason, and demonstrating to the Vlhani that you consider her life more valuable than any of theirs. No: leave her be. She's a pilgrim. It's her privilege to die if she wants."

Hurrr'poth was probably right; being right was his way. But he did not know human beings, or me, anywhere near as well as he knew Vlhani, and could not understand that what he advised was unacceptable. I set the skimmer to land, and hopped out almost a full second before it was strictly safe to jump, hitting the slope with an impact that sent jabs of pain through both knees.

The Vlhani loomed above me on all sides: great black spheres wobbling about on liquid flailing whips. One stepped daintily over both me and the skimmer, disappearing without any visible concern into the roiling mob further down the slope; another half-dozen seemed to freeze solid at the sight of me, as if unsure what improvisations I might require of them. None seemed angry or aggressive, which didn't make me feel any

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better. Vlhani didn't have to be aggressive to be extraordinarily dangerous. Their whips had a tensile strength approaching steel and moved at speeds that had been known to exceed sound. And though we'd all walked among Vlhani without being harmed — I'd even been picked up and examined by curious ones — those had been calm, peaceful Vlhani, Vlhani at rest, Vlhani who still possessed their race's equivalent of sanity. These were driven pilgrims here to dance themselves into a frenzy until they dropped; they could slash me, the woman, Hurrr'poth and the skimmer into slices without even being fully aware they were doing it...

Fifteen meters away, the woman twisted and arched her back and flailed arms as soft and supple as ribbons. "Go 'way!" she shouted, in an unidentifiably-accented Human-Standard. "Don't dang yeselves! Le' me alone!"

I switched on my harness, activating the pair of artificial whips that immediately rose from my shoulders and snaked above my head, undulating a continuous clumsy approximation of the Vlhani dance for *Friend*. Our delegation had borrowed the technology and much of the basic vocabulary from the Riirgaans; with its built-in vocabulary of fifty basic memes, it was sufficient to allow us clumsy four-limb humanoids to communicate with the Vlhani at the level of baby talk. Which by itself wouldn't be enough to get me and the girl out of the amphitheater alive...

...broadcasting *Friend* in all directions, I ran to her side, stopping only to evade a huge towering Marionette passing between us. When I got close enough to grab her, she didn't run, or fight me; she didn't even stop dancing. She just said, "Le' me go. Save yeself."

"No," I said. "I can't let you do this."

She twisted her arm in a way wholly inconsistent with human anatomy, and twisted out of my grip without any effort at all. "Ye cannae stop me," she said, flitting away in a pirouette graceful enough to hurt my eyes. I hadn't even succeeded in slowing her down. I turned around, shot a quick Why-the-Hell-Aren't-You-Helping-Me look at the impassive Hurrr'poth, then ran after her again.

I found her dancing beneath, and in perfect sync with, a Marionette five times her height; the eight whips it held aloft all undulating to the same unheard music as her own arms. It had anchored four of its whips in

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the ground, one on each side of her; turning itself into a enclosed set for her solo performance. The effect was sheltering, almost maternal, which didn't make me feel any safer scurrying past those whips to join her at the center. Again, she made no attempt to evade me, merely faced straight ahead, looking past me, past the Vlhani, and past the eyes of all the sentients who'd be watching the recordings of this scene for more years than any of us would be alive...past everything but the movements her dance required her to make next.

The harness piped a thousand contradictory translations in my ear. *Danger. Life. Night. Cold. Hungry. Storm. Dance.* I had no idea whether it translated her or the Vlhani.

"All right," I said, lamely. "You want to play it like this, go ahead. But tell me why. Give me some idea what you think you're trying to accomplish!"

Her head rotated a perfect 360 degrees on her long and slender neck, matching a similar revolution performed by the featureless Marionette head directly above us. Her eyes remained focused on mine as long as her face remained in view; then sought me out again, the instant her features came around the other side. Her expression was serious, but unintimidated. "I tryin' to waltz Vlhani. What are ye trying to accomplish? Kill yeself bein' a gilgamesh?"

"I'd rather not. I just want you to come with me before you get hurt."

"Ye're in a lot hotter stew than I be. Leastin' I ken the steps."

The Vlhani didn't stop dancing; they didn't slow down or speed up or in any visible way react to anything either Isadora or I said. If anything, they took no visible notice of us at all. But I was there, in the middle of it, and though my understanding of Vlhani sign language was as minimal as any human's, I did...feel...something, like a great communal gasp, coming from all sides. And I found myself suddenly, instinctively, thoroughly certain that every Vlahni in the entire amphitheater was following every nuance of every word that passed between this strange young woman and me. Even if they were not close enough to see or hear us, they were still being informed by those around them, who were in turn breathlessly passing on the news from those farther up the line. We were the center of their attention, the focus of their obsessions. And they wanted me to know it.

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It wasn't telepathy, which would have shown up on our instruments. Whatever it was couldn't be measured, didn't translate to the neurecs, wasn't observed by any of the delegations. I personally think I was only making an impossible cognitive leap in the stress of the moment and for just one heartbeat understood Vlhani dance the way it was meant to be understood. Whatever the reason, I knew at once that this impasse was the single most important thing taking place in the entire valley...

Love, my harness squeaked. *Safety. Dance. Food.*

Sad.

She'd gone pale. "What are ye plannin' to do?"

What I did was either the bravest or most insane or most perceptive thing I've ever done.

Reversing our positions, placing my life in her hands, I simply turned my back on her and walked away...not toward Hurrr'poth, the skimmer, and safety, but farther down the slope, into the densest concentrations of Vlhani. It was impossible to see very far into that maze of flailing black whips, but I approached a particularly thick part of the mob, where I might be filleted and sectioned in the time it took to draw a breath, as quickly as I could without actually breaking into a run. It was far easier than it should have been. All I had to do was disengage my terror from the muscles that drove my legs....

She cried out: "Hey! HEY!"

Four Vlhani whips stabbed the earth half a meter in front of me. I flinched, but didn't stop walking. The Vlhani moved out of my way with another seven-league step. I stepped over the stab wounds in the earth, continued on my way...

...and found her circling around in front of me. "Just what the crot do ye ken ye're doin'?"

My first answer was obliterated by stammering: a sign of the terror I was trying so hard not to feel. I swallowed, concentrated on forming the words and speaking them understandably, and said: "Taking a walk. It seems like a nice day for it."

"Ye keep waltzin' this direction, ye won't last two minutes."

"Then you've got yourself a moral decision," I said, with a confidence that was a million kilometers away. "You can bring me back to my skimmer and hold my hand while I pilot us both back to safety. Or you can

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stay here and dance, and let me die with you. But the only way to avoid putting you on my conscience is to put myself on yours."

Danger. Dance. Danger.

Hot wind fanned my back, a razor-sharp whirr following in its wake: the kind of near-miss so close that you feel the pain anyway. I stiffened, held on to my last remaining shreds of self-control, and walked past her.

She muttered a curse in some language I didn't know and wrapped her arms around my chest. I mean that literally. Each arm went serpentine and encircled me twice before joining in a handclasp at my collarbone. They felt like human flesh; they were even warm and moist from exertion. But there was something other than muscle and bone at work beneath that too-flexible skin.

Her heart beat in sync with mine.

"I ought to let ye do it," she breathed. "I ought to let ye waltz in there and get torn to gobs."

I managed to turn my head enough to see her. "That's your decision."

"And ye really think ye ken what that's goin' to be, don't you? Ye think ye ken me well enough to guess how much I'm willin' to toss for some mungie catard tryin' to play martyr. Ye...think...ye...ken."

Sometimes, in crisis situations, you find yourself saying things so stupid they come back to haunt you. "I'm a good judge of people."

"Ye're a good judge of vacuum. Ye sit on that mungie viewing stand and ye coo at the spectacle and ye shed a brave tear for all the buggies tearin' each other to gobs for yer ball-tinglies. And ye wear those ridiculous things," indicating my artificial whips, "and ye write mungie treatises on how beautiful it all be and ye pretend ye're tryin' to understand it while all the while ye see nothing, ye ken nothing, ye understand nothing. Ye don't even appreciate that they been goin' out of their way to avoid gobbing ye. They been concentratin' on ye instead of the show, usin' all the leeway their script gives them, steppin' a little faster here and a little slower there, just for ye, me mungie good judge of people. But if ye keep waltzin' this direction, they won't be able to watch out for ye without turning the whole show to crot, and they gob ye to spatters before yer next gasp!"

If she paused for breath at all during her speech, I didn't notice. There were no hesitations, no false starts, no fleeting "uh"s to indicate blind

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groping for the phrase she needed; just a swift, impassioned, angry torrent of words, exploding outward like wild animals desperate to be free. Her eyes brimmed with an anguished, pleading desperation, begging me to leave her with the death she had chosen: the look of a woman who knew that what she asked was bigger than any of us; and she desperately needed me to believe that.

Danger. Dance. Birth.

I almost gave in.

Instead, I spoke softly: "I'm not interested in the moral decisions of the Vlhani. I'm interested in yours. Are you coming with me or not?"

Her grip loosened enough for me to wonder if my bluff had been called. Then she shuddered, and the beginnings of a sob caught in her throat. "Crod it. CROD it! How the hell did ye ken?"

At the time, I didn't know her nearly well enough to understand what she meant.

But already, it was impossible not to hate myself, a little, for defying her.

4.

The trip back to the skimmer wasn't nearly as nerve-wracking as the trip out, with her providing us a serpentine but safe path directly through the heart of the Ballet. She told me when to speed up, when to slow down, when to proceed straight ahead, and when to take the long way around a spot that inevitably, seconds later, became a sea of furiously dancing Vlhani. I followed her directions not because I considered her infallible, but because she seemed to believe she knew what she was doing, and I was completely lost.

Before we even got near the spot where I'd left the skimmer, I heard the hum of its drive burning the air directly above us: Hurrr'poth, piloting it to a landing beside us. Which was itself not the least of the day's surprises, since the skimmer was set for a human gene pattern, and Hurrr'poth had no business being able to control it at all. Even as he lowered it to boarding altitude, I called, "What the hell — "

He waved. "Hurry up and get in. I don't know how much time we have to do this."

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She trembled, not with fear, but with the utter heartbreak of a woman being forced to give up that which she wanted above all else. Getting her this far had shattered her; forcing her onto the skimmer would carve wounds that might not ever heal. But at least she'd have a chance to survive them...something I couldn't say for her chances dancing among the Vlhani. I said, "You first."

She took Hurrr'poth's outstretched hand, and climbed aboard. I followed her, taking a seat directly beside her in case she decided to try something. Hurrr'poth took off, set the controls for the return flight, then turned around in his seat, so he could gently trill at us. "I hope you don't consider me impolite, Alex."

His manners were the very last thing on my mind. "For what?"

"For taking such liberties with your vehicle. But there were a number of very large Vlhani determined to pass through the spot where we'd landed — and I thought it best for the purposes of our safe escape that I argue with your genetic reader instead. It saw reason a lot faster than I thought it would."

"Think nothing of it."

He turned toward the girl. "My name is Viliissin Hurrr'poth. I am a third-level wave-form linguist for the Riirgaan delegation, and whatever else happens now, I must state my professional opinion that you are an astonishingly talented dancer for one of your species; you did not appear to be at all out of place among the Vlhani. It is a grand pleasure indeed to make your acquaintance. And you are — "

"Isadora," she said, sullenly. It was a good thing he'd asked; I'd been too preoccupied by matters of survival to get around to it myself.

"Is-a-do-ra," he repeated, slowly, testing each syllable, committing it to memory. "Interesting. I do not believe I've encountered that one before. Is there an adjunct to that name? A family or clan designation?"

She looked away: the gesture of a woman who no longer had the energy or the inclination to answer questions. "No. Just Isadora."

I saw the silence coming and ached for the wit to come up with the words that would break it. I wanted to come up with a great, stirring speech about the sanctity of life and the inevitability of second chances: about the foolishness of suicide in a universe filled with millions of choices. I wanted to tell her that I was glad that she'd chosen to come with

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me and live, for I'd sensed something special about her — a strength of will and purity of purpose that would have rendered her special even without the enhancements that had made flexible whips of her limbs. I wanted to tell her that there were better places to apply those attributes than here, on this planet, in this amphitheater, among thousands of doomed Vlhani. I wanted to say all of that, and more, for I suddenly needed to understand her more than I'd ever needed to understand the creatures who danced below. But Hurrr'poth was right: she'd been perfectly at home among the Vlhani, and was just a trembling, devastated young woman beside us.

Below us, the Vlhani writhed: a sea of gleaming black flesh and snapping black whips, their spherical heads all turning to watch us as we passed.

"They look like they're slowing down," noted Hurrr'poth.

I couldn't tell. To me, their Ballet looked every bit as frenetic now as it had five minutes ago. It all seemed perfectly graceful, perfectly fascinating, and perfectly alien: an ocean of fluid, undifferentiated movement, diminished not at all by the deletion of one strange young woman with chevrons on both cheeks. Why not? They'd always danced without her; they could just go ahead and dance without her again. If anything, they were probably relieved not to have her getting underfoot anymore...

I tried very hard to believe that, and failed. Hurrr'poth knew more about their dance than I. Not, it seemed, as much as Isadora — he wouldn't have been able to stride into the middle of the Ballet and expect to keep his skin intact — but enough to read the essence of what he saw. If he said they were slowing down, they were slowing down.

And it could only be because I'd taken away Isadora.

They were as devastated as she was.

Why?

5.

We landed the skimmer in the open field behind the viewing stand. Dhiju led a small mob of humans and aliens from their seats to meet us. They all wanted to know who Isadora was, where she'd come from, and why she was here; I don't honestly think anybody actually stayed behind

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to watch the Ballet. They crowded around us so densely that we didn't even attempt to leave the skimmer: an ironic, unintended parody of the dance we'd all come here to witness.

Dhiju's face was flushed and perspiring heavily — a condition owing as much to his intoxication as his concern — but he retained enough self-control to speak with me first. "Astonishing work, Alex. I'll see to it that you get some time taken off your contract for this."

"Thank you, sir."

He next directed his attention to Hurrr'poth. "And you too, sir — you didn't have to risk yourself for one of ours, but you did anyway, and I want to express my thanks for that."

Hurrr'poth bowed slightly, a gesture that surprised me a little, since I would have expected much more than that from a sentient who so prized the sound of his own voice. Maybe he was too impatient for the part that we all knew would have to come next: Dhiju as disciplinarian. And Dhiju complied, with the fiercest, angriest, most forbidding expression he knew how to muster: "And as for you, young lady: do you have any idea just how many laws you've broken? Just what the hell was going through your mind, anyway? Did you really wake up this morning and think it would be a good day for being torn to pieces? Is that what you wanted out of your afternoon today?"

Isadora stared at him. "The buggies invited me."

"To what? Die? Are you really that blind?"

Whereupon Hurrr'poth returned to form: "Forgive me, Mr. Dhiju, but I don't believe you've thought this out adequately."

Dhiju didn't like the interruption, but protocol forced him to be polite. "Why not? What mistake am I making?"

"I daresay it should be obvious. What do we know about this young lady so far? She's obviously had herself altered to approximate Vlhani movement; she's evidently learned more about their dance than either your people or mine have ever been able to learn; she's made her way here from wherever it was she started, apparently without any of your people finding out about her; and she's snuck herself into what may be the most thoroughly studied native ritual in recorded history, without hundreds of observers from seven separate confederacies spotting her until she was in the middle of it. No, Mr. Dhiju, whatever else you might say about her

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wisdom in trying to join the Vlhani Ballet, I don't think you can fairly accuse her of coming here on a foolish spur-of-the-moment whim. What she's done would have required many years of conscious preparation, a fair amount of cooperation from people with the resources to give her these enhancements, and a degree of personal dedication that I can only characterize as an obsession."

Dhiju digested that for so long that I thought for a moment the hallucinogens had prevented him from understanding it at all. Then he nodded, regarded Isadora with a new expression that was closer to pity, and met my eyes. He didn't have to actually insult me by giving the orders.

Find out.

I nodded. He turned and strode off, not in the direction of the viewing stand, but toward his own skimmer, which was parked with the rest of the embassy vehicles. A half-dozen indentures, including Rory and Kathy and Oskar, scurried along behind him, knowing that they'd be required for the investigation to follow.

I looked at Isadora. "You can save us all a lot of trouble by just telling us everything we need to know now."

She glared at me insolently, the dark alien fires burning behind her eyes: still unwilling to forgive me for saving her life, or herself for saving mine. "Will it get me back to the show?"

"No. I'm sorry. I can't imagine Dhiju ever allowing that."

Her look was as clear as Dhiju's: Then go ahead. Find out what you can. But I'm not going to make things easier for you.

Fair enough. If she could learn to understand the Vlhani, then I could sure learn to understand her. I turned to Hurrr'poth: "Are you coming along?"

He considered it, then bobbed his head no. "Thank you, Alex, but no. I think I can be of better use conducting my own investigation using other avenues. I will, however, be in touch as soon as I have anything relevant to contribute."

"See you, you old criminal," I told him.

It was a personal experiment, to see how he'd react to a joke, and he made me proud: "See you soon...pornographer."

* * *

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6.

It may have been the only time in the history of the human presence on Vlhan that the delegation was actually expected to deal with a Major Diplomatic Incident. Oh, we'd had minor crises over the years (uneventful rescue missions to pick up linguists and anthropologists who'd gotten themselves stranded in the field, tiffs and disagreements with the representatives of the other delegations), but never anything of life-and-death import; never anything designed to test us as representatives of the Confederacy, never a dozen separate mysteries all wrapped up in the form of one close-mouthed, steadfastly silent young woman.

And so we worked through the night, accomplishing absolutely nothing.

We took DNA samples, voice-prints, and retinal scans, sending them via hytex to the databases of a thousand planets; nobody admitted to having any idea who she was. We went through our library for record of human cultures with ritual facial tattooing. We found several, but none still extant that would have marked a young woman with chevrons on both cheeks. We seized on the slang phrases she'd used, hoping they'd lead us back to a world where they happened to be in current usage, and found nothing — though that meant little, since language is fluid and slang can go in and out of style at weekly intervals.

She silently cooperated with a medical examination which elaborated upon that which we already knew: that her entire skeleton, most of her musculature, and much of her skin had been replaced by enhanced substitutes. Her arms alone were minor miracles of engineering, with over ten thousand flexible joints in just the distance between shoulder and wrist. Her nervous system was also only partially her own, which made sense, since the human brain isn't set up to work a limb that bends in that many places. She had a complex system of micro-controllers up and down her arms, to translate the nerve impulses on their way to and from the brain. She just had to decide the moves she wanted to make; the micro-controllers let her limbs know how to go about making them. There were also special chemical filters in her lungs, to maximize the efficiency with which she processed oxygen, several major improvements made to her internal connective tissue, and uncounted other changes, only some of which made immediate sense.

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There weren't many human agencies capable of this kind of work, and most of them operated at the level of governments and major corporations. We contacted just about all of those, from Transtellar Securities to the Bettelhine Munitions Corporation; they all denied any knowledge of her. Of course, they could have been lying, since some of her enhancements were illegal; but then they operated in the realm of profit, and there was no possible profit in turning a young woman into a sort of quasi-Vlhani, geared only toward her own self-destruction.

That left nonhuman agencies, some of which could be expected to harbor motives that made no human sense. But we couldn't contact many of them by hytex, and the few we could were a waste of time, since they had a relaxed attitude toward the truth anyway. Kathy Ng, who was in charge of that aspect of the investigation, got fed up enough to grouse, "How am I supposed to know who's telling the truth? None of them have ever been consistent liars!" Everybody sympathized; nobody had any better suggestions.

As for me, I spent four hours at the hytex poring through the passenger manifests of civilian vessels passing anywhere within a twenty light-year distance of Vlhan, finding nobody fitting her general description who couldn't be accounted for. Then I stole a few minutes to check on Isadora, who we'd locked up in our biological containment chamber. It was the closest thing we had to a prison facility, though we'd never expected to use it that way. Hai Dhiju sat in the observation room, glaring at the sullen-faced Isadora through the one-way screen. Oskar Levine sat beside him, alternately gaping at Isadora and feeding Dhiju's ego. When Dhiju noticed me, something flared in his bloodshot, heavy-lidded eyes: something that could have been merely the footprint of the hallucinogens still being flushed from his system, or could have been something worse, like despair. Either way, he didn't yell at me to go back to work, but instead gestured for me to sit down beside him.

I did. And for a long time neither of us said anything, preferring to watch Isadora. She was exercising (though performing was more like it; since even though the room on her side of the shield was just four soft featureless walls, she had to know that there would be observers lurking behind one of them). Her form of exercise involved testing the flexibility of her limbs, turning them into spirals, arcs, and jagged lightning-shapes;

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a thousand changes each instant. It was several different species of beautiful — from its impossible inhuman grace, to the sheer passion that informed every move.

The translation device squeaked out a word every thirty seconds or so. *Death. Vlhani. World. Sad. Dance. Food. Life. Sad.*

Human.

None of it meant anything to me. But my eyes burned, just looking at her. I wanted to look at her forever.

Dhiju took a hit of a blue liquid in a crystalline cylinder. "Anything?"

It took me several seconds to realize he'd spoken to me. "No, sir. I don't think she left a trail for us to find."

Cold.

"It makes no sense," he said, with a frustration that must have burned him to the marrow. "Everything leaves a trail. In less than one day I could find out what you had for breakfast the day you turned five, check your psych profile and find out which year of your adolescence featured the most vivid erotic dreams; get a full folio on the past fifteen generations of your family and still have time to get a full list of the dangerous recessive genes carried by the second cousins of all the children you went to school with. But everybody's drawing a blank with her. I wouldn't be surprised to find out she was some kind of mutant Vlhani."

"It would certainly make her a lot easier to deal with," said Oskar. "Just send her back to the Ballet, and let nature take its course."

I would have snapped at the bastard had Dhiju not beaten me to it. "Not an option."

"Then ship her off-planet," Oskar shrugged. "Or keep her in detention until the Ballet's over."

"I can't. It's become bigger than her." Dhiju looked at me. "In case you haven't heard, the Ballet's off."

I felt no surprise. "They stopped, then?"

"Cold. We weren't really sure until about an hour ago — it took them that long to wind down — but then they just planted their center whips in the dirt and began to wait. They've already sent a message through the Riirgaans that they need her back in order to continue. I've been fending off messages from all the other delegations saying I ought to let her, as the Vlhani have jurisdiction here."

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I thought of our superiors back home, who'd no doubt want the Vlhani appeased to preserve future relations. "That kind of pressure's only going to get worse."

He emitted a sound midway between a sob and a laugh. "I don't care how bad it gets. I have a serious problem with suicide. I think anybody foolish enough to choose it as an option is by definition not competent to be trusted with the decision."

Storm. World.

I thought of all the Vlhani who made that decision every year — who came, as honored pilgrims, to the place where they were destined to dance until their hearts burst. We'd always found a terrible kind of beauty in that ritual...but we'd never thought of them as incompetent, or mad, or too foolish to be trusted with the choice. Was that only because we considered them nothing more than giant spiders, not worth saving?

Fire. Love. Danger.

Disturbed, I said, "I was with her, sir. She was one of the most competent people I've ever met."

Dance.

"Not on that issue. It's still suicide. And I don't believe in it and I'm not going to let her do it."

I faced the shield, and watched Isadora. She was running in circles now, so swiftly that she blurred. When she suddenly stopped, placed a palm against one wall, and hung her head, I couldn't believe it was fatigue. She wasn't sweating or breathing heavily; she'd just gotten to the point where it made Marionette sense to stop. After a moment, I said, "Has anybody actually tried talking to her directly?"

"That's all I've been doing. I had people in there asking questions until their breath gave out. It's no good. She just keeps telling us to, uh, crod ourselves."

World. Dance.

"With all due respect, sir, interrogating her is one thing. Talking to her is another."

Dhiju came close to reprimanding me, but thought better of it. "Might as well. You're the only one here who's ever demonstrated the slightest clue of how to deal with her. Go ahead."

So I went in.

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The containment chamber was equipped with a one-way field, permeable as air from one side but hard as anything in existence on the other. It was invaluable for imprisoning anything too dangerous to be allowed out, which up until now had meant bacteria and small predators. The controls for reversing the polarity were outside the chamber, on a platform within easy reach of Oskar and Dhiju. The second I passed through the silvery sheen at the doorway, I was, effectively, as much a prisoner as she was. But it didn't feel that way; at the moment, I didn't want to be anywhere else but with her.

She had her back to me, but she knew who I was even as I entered; I could tell that just by the special way she froze at the sound of my step. She turned, saw me, and with a resignation that hurt more than any words could, leaned back against the opposite wall.

I did not go to her. Instead, I found a nice neutral spot on the wall and faced her from across the width of the chamber. "Hello."

Her expression would have been strictly neutral were it not for the anger behind those dark, penetrating eyes. Facing those eyes was like being opened up and examined, piece by piece. It should have been unsettling; against my will, I found I liked it.

"I've got to hand it to you," I said, conversationally. "The Vlhani are on strike, the other delegations are going crazy, nobody here has the slightest clue who you are, and I'm supposed to come in here and get the information that everybody else can't. Who you are. Where you come from, where you got those augmentations, and how you got here."

Impatience. Establishing that she'd already been through this — that she hadn't answered the questions before and wouldn't be answering them now. Wondering just what I thought I was accomplishing by throwing good effort after bad.

And then I folded my arms and said, "The thing is, I really don't care about any of that. Wherever you come from, it's just a place. How you got here is just transportation. And as for who put in those augmentations? That's just a brand name. None of that makes any difference to me at all."

She rolled her eyes incredulously. "What does?"

"Why."

"In twenty-five words or less?"

"Counting those? Sure. You have nineteen left."

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She blinked several times, back-counting, then flashed an appreciative smile. "Only if ye ken twenty-five as two words instead of one. Ye shouldn't."

"All right. But that still brings you down to...uh..."

"Seven," she said, simply. And then: "I'm madly in love with their show."

Damned if she hadn't done it, on the dot. We grinned at each other — both of us understanding that she hadn't told me anything I couldn't have guessed already, but enjoying the little game anyway. I said: "So am I. So's everybody on Vlhan, and half the known universe. That doesn't explain how you came to understand it so well...and why you're so determined to risk your life dancing among them."

She waggled a finger at me. "Uh-uh, boyo. It's yer turn. Twenty-five words or less, how can ye say ye love the Show when ye don't ken it one bit?"

It didn't come off as rude, the way she asked it — it was a sincere question, expressing sincere bafflement. I measured my response very carefully, needing to both be truthful and match the precision of her answer. "I suppose...that if I only loved things I understood perfectly, I'd be living a pretty loveless existence. Sometimes, love is just...needing to understand."

"That's not love, boyo. That's just curiosity. Give yerself an extension and riddle me this: What do ye feel when ye watch their show? Do you ken their heart? Their creativity? Their need to do this, even at the edge of dyin'?"

"Maybe," I said. "Some of it."

"And how do ye ken ye're not croddin' the whole thing to bloody gobs? How do ye ken ye're not seeing tears when the buggies mean laughs? Or that it's really a big show and not a mungie prayer?"

It was hard to keep my voice level. "Is that what you're saying, Isadora? That it's not an art form?"

She shook her head sadly, and dared me with eyes like miniature starscapes. There was pain, there: entire lifetimes of pain. But there was arrogance, too: the kind that comes from being able to understand what so many others cannot. And both were tempered by the distant, but genuine hope that maybe I'd get it after all.

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After a moment, I said, "All right. How about I tell you what we think we know, and you tell me how and where we're sadly mistaken?"

She shrugged. "Ye're free to toss."

"All right. The Marionette dance isn't a conventional symbolic language, like speech, but a holographic imaging system, like whalesong. The waveforms rippling up those whips aren't transmitting words or concepts, but detailed three-dimensional images. They must be tremendously sophisticated pictures, too, since the amount of information being passed back and forth is huge. And if a Marionette can paint a detailed map of the immediate environment in about ten seconds of strenuous dance, then the Ballet may have enough detail for a complete scale model of this solar system. The problem is, we haven't been able to translate more than a few simple movements — and even then we think they're talking down to us."

Isadora nodded. "Ye're right. That they be."

I had made that part up. Excited now, certain she had the key that the rest of us had missed, I leaned forward and said, "But they weren't talking down to you, were you? They respected you. They made a place for you. How is that? Who are you to them?"

"Someone who kens them."

"And how is it you understand the dance when we can't?"

"Because I ken it's a show, not a mungie code." When I reacted to that with a mere uncomprehending blink, she just shook her head tiredly, appeared to reconsider silence as an option, and said: "Peer this. There's a species out in space, known by a name I can't make me lips say. They're pitifully boring folks...born filing-systems, really...but they're totally tingled to crot by the idea of the human pun. The idea of ringin' two chimes with one phrase seems as sparkledusty to them as the buggie dance be to us. And their greatest brains been wastin' years of sweat just tryin' to ken. Ye can buy the whole libraries they've penned about it."

I seemed to recall reading or hearing about the race in question, at some point in the distant past. "So?"

"So they crod up the whole sorry mess. They don't ken humor and they don't ken that a pun's supposed to be funny. They think it's zen-time instead...a, how-ye-put-it, ironic human commentary on the interconnectedness of all things. Once upon a time, I peered a pair of the

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dingheads pickin' apart a old terran comedy about professional athletes with wack names — names that were questions like Who and What and Why. It didn't seem all that laugh-time, to me, but I could ken it was supposed to be silly — and they didn't. I vow to ye, Alex, it was like peering a couple of mathematicians dustin' up over an equation. Like ye folks, they peered the mechanism, and missed the context."

Dammit, she did know something. I pushed myself off the wall, and went to her. "So tell me the context. You don't have to give me all of it, if you don't want to, but something. A clue."

And she smiled at me. Smiled, with eyes that knew far more than I ever would. "Will it get me back in the show?"

Against my will, I glanced at the featureless wall that concealed the outer lab; I didn't need to be able to see through it to know what Ambassador Dhiju was doing on the other side. He was leaning forward in his seat, resting his chin on a cradle of locked hands, his eyes narrowing as he waited to see if I'd make any promises he couldn't allow me to keep. He was probably silently urging me to go ahead; like all career diplomats, he'd spent a lifetime sculpting the truth into the shapes that best suited the needs of the moment, and would see nothing wrong with doing the same now. But he hadn't been with her in the amphitheater, as I'd been; he hadn't bartered his life for hers, and been the beneficiary of the sacrifice she made in return; he couldn't know that it would have been unthinkable for me to even attempt to lie to her. So I came as close to being honest with her as I dared. I said nothing.

She understood, of course. It was inevitable that she would. And though she must have known the answer even before asking the question, it still hit her just as hard; she lowered her face, and looked away, unwilling to let me see what was in her eyes. "Then the deal's bloody gobbed. I don't speak one crot more 'less I get back to the show."

"But — "

"That's final."

After a moment, I understood that it was. It was all she cared about, all she had to negotiate with. Any attempt to pretend otherwise would be an insult. And so I nodded, and went to the door, waiting for Oskar to reverse the field so I could leave.

Except that I was wrong. It wasn't final, after all; there was still

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business between us, still something she couldn't say goodbye to me without saying.

She said: "Alex?"

I looked at her. "What?"

She didn't meet my eyes: just stared at her feet, as if peering past the floor and past the ground to face a scene now half a day in our past. "Were ye just blowin' dust, back at the show? Were ye...really goin' to waltz with the buggies and me...if I'd not ridden that skimmer out with ye?"

"Absolutely. I wasn't about to leave there without you."

She nodded to herself, as if confirming the answer to a question that nobody had bothered to ask out loud...then shook her head, flashed a dazzling smile, and, in perfectly proper Human-standard, said: "Then you deserve this much. The Ballet doesn't end, each year, just because the last dancer dies. Think...the persistence of vision."

7.

We didn't find out about it until the postmortems, but first blood was shed on a swampy peninsula over a thousand kilometers from our embassy: a place equally inhospitable to both Vlhani and Men, with terrain soft enough to swallow wanderers of either race.

Dr. Kevin McDaniel wasn't officially attached to the embassy. In truth, he was an exobotanist, on Vlhan as part of an unrelated commercial project having something to do with a certain smelly reed native to the swamps. It may have been important work, but to the rest of us it was nowhere near as compelling as the mysteries of the Vlhani, which interested him not at all. Usually, we only remembered he was on-planet at all because he was a clumsy oaf, and one of us always had to keep him company lest some absentminded misstep leave him drowning in the ooze with nobody to pull him out. It was an annoying detail that everybody lower than Dhiju had pulled at least once. We made jokes about it.

Today, McDaniel's babysitter was a plump young kinetic pattern analyst by the name of Li-Hsin Chang, who had entered her servitude one year behind me. Li-Hsin had bitterly complained about the duty rotation that had obliged her, and not anybody else, to miss the spectacle of the

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Ballet in favor of a week spent trudging through muck in the company of the single most boring sentient on the planet. And the strange developments at the amphitheater only made matters worse: even as she sat in the skimmer hovering five meters up and watched McDaniel perform his usual arcane measurements among the reeds, she was deeply plugged into the hytex, absorbing all the latest bulletins about me and Isadora and the Vlhani crisis.

Under the circumstances, Li-Hsin can be forgiven for failing to spot the Vlhani until it was almost upon him.

Vlhani can weigh up to a thousand kilos, but they have a controlled way of running that amounts to keeping most of that weight in the air, and even at full speed they can make significantly less sound than a running man. It's not deliberate stealth, but tremendous inherent grace. And while even they're not quite as quiet splashing through muddy swampland as they are galloping over dry, densely packed earth, they still never stumble, never make a misstep, never release one decibel of sound that they don't absolutely have to. This one's approach was drowned out until the very last minute by the hum of the skimmer's drive and the clumsy splashing-about of Dr. McDaniel. When Li-Hsin heard a particularly violent splash, she peered over the railing, saw that McDaniel had wandered only a few meters from where he was supposed to be, then heard another, louder, splash from the north.

It was a ten-whip mature Vlhani approaching at top speed. It ran the way Vlhani always run when they push themselves to their limits — spinning its whips like the spokes of a wheel, with the shiny black head at the center. It ran so fast that the whips blurred together in great gray streaks. It ran so fast that it seemed to be flying. And it was coming their way.

Li-Hsin can also be forgiven for not immediately realizing that it was hostile. For one thing, it wasn't wholly unheard-of for a huge adult Vlhani to be running around in the middle of the swamp. It was unusual, but they did sometimes wander far from their usual habitat. She'd seen a mating pair just the other day. For another thing, Vlhani simply weren't hostile. They may have been too dangerous to approach during their Ballet, but that was a function of the Ballet, not of the Vlhani. In their everyday existence, they were extraordinarily gentle; Li-Hsin had walked among

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them without protection for two years, and had developed an easy familiarity with those she saw most frequently. She even considered one or two of them friends — at least, as much as she could when the best our harnesses could do was pipe the meme *Friend* back and forth. That was enough for her. As it was for me. And the rest of us.

So even when she saw that Dr. McDaniel was directly in its path, it still didn't occur to her that it might be deliberately attacking him. She did nothing more drastic than just flip on the amps and cry out: "Mac! Get out of the way!"

McDaniel, who'd been too absorbed in his measurements to see or hear the big Vlhani's approach, glanced up at the skimmer, annoyance creasing his pale, sweaty features. He spotted the Vlhani a second later, stood there dumbfounded, wholly unwilling to believe that this was actually happening to him, then saw that he was about to be run over and leaped to one side, belly-flopping in the middle of a pool of stagnant water. He sank beneath the surface and did not come up for air. Vlhani whips sank deep into the ooze where he had been, with a force that would have pulped him. The Vlhani didn't even slow down. It was ten meters past him before Li-Hsin even had time to yell, "MAC!"

She grabbed the controls and swooped low over the water where McDaniel had disappeared. He came to the surface choking and spitting, but waving that he was all right. She was about to descend further to pick him up when he spotted the Vlhani, fifty meters away and circling around for another go. Unlike Li-Hsin, he was totally ignorant about the Vlhani, and therefore had no preconceptions to shed; he knew immediately that the attack was real, and that the Vlhan would be on him again long before Li-Hsin managed to pick him up. He frantically waved her off: "Go away! It's circling back!"

Li-Hsin looked up, and saw that McDaniel was right. If she still had any doubts about its intentions, the speed of its approach would have banished them: were this an accident, it would have slowed down and returned with exaggerated caution, hanging its head at the angle that we'd all come to recognize as mimed remorse. She glanced at McDaniel and shouted: "STAY DOWN!"

McDaniel yelled back: "DON'T — " But it was too late for Li-Hsin to hear him. In one smooth movement, she'd turned the skimmer around,

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aimed it toward the approaching Vlhani, and instructed it to accelerate. She did this without thinking, and without hesitation, seized by the kind of desperate inventiveness that takes over only when there are no other options available. A direct collision with a skimmer, moving at those speeds, would splatter even the largest Marionette; Li-Hsin had to know that such a crash would certainly kill her too. She probably hoped it would be intimidated enough to duck and run.

Except that it didn't happen. Just before the moment of collision, the Marionette leaped, and came down on top of the skimmer. Two of its whips were broken at the moment of impact: another one was cleanly amputated by the lift coils. The rest cushioned its landing. The neurec connections, which had so clearly captured all of Li-Hsin's actions and sensations up until now, now documented her helpless astonishment as she suddenly found herself surrounded by a cage of undulating whips. The Marionette's head loomed close behind her for an instant, then disappeared out of frame. A whip slashed across the frame, blurred, and then disappeared, leaving her without a right arm.

The horizon behind them spun like a dial.

Then the skimmer crash-landed into the swamp, and both Li-Hsin and the Marionette were decapitated instantly.

It took McDaniel four hours to dig out the hytex and call for help. By then, those of us still left alive were way too busy to hear him...

8.

The only question anybody really managed to answer before everything fell to pieces was the precise manner of Isadora's secret arrival on Vlhan. It was Rory Metcalf who made the connection with a supply transport that, about eight months ago, had entered Vlhan's atmosphere half a world away from its assigned landing position, come within a hair's breadth of a landing before seeming to realize that it was in the wrong place, then risen back to 50,000 meters to travel the rest of the way. This might have seemed suspicious at the time, but the bickering pilots had struck everybody as just a couple of incompetents with no real talent for the work. When Rory looked up their courier license, she found that they'd subsequently been arrested on several charges of carrying unregistered

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passengers. It was a mildly impressive piece of deduction, which probably solved one minor part of the mystery, but still explained absolutely nothing.

And even if we could put together the parts that mattered, we were running out of time.

We'd placed our embassy on an isolated plateau that was both higher and colder than the Vlhani found comfortable — a location we'd chosen not out of fear for our own safety, but common courtesy and respect for their privacy. After all, we could reach any place on their planet within three hours; we could walk among the Vlhani as frequently as they cared to let us, without obtrusively cluttering up any land they were already using. So, like the Riirgaans and the K'cenhowten and the Cid and all the other embassies, we'd placed our cluster of buildings far outside their normal migration patterns, and normally didn't entertain Vlhani guests more than once or twice a year. Usually, we could stand outside the collection of prefabricated buildings that made up our compound, look down upon the rolling gray hills that surrounded us, and feel completely alone, as if we were the only sentients on the entire planet.

But not today. Today, when a few of us took a break to face the Vlhani sunset, we found a landscape dotted with thousands of spiders. The ones we could see were all approaching from the west; the other embassies reported many more approaching us from every direction, but the herds in the west had been closer, and were first to show up. They didn't approach in formation, like an army, but in randomly spaced groups of one or two or three, like strangers all heading the same way by coincidence. They moved so quickly that every time they crested the top of a hill their momentum sent them flying in great coltish leaps. The sun behind them turned their elongated shadows into surrealistic tangles. The few that had reached the base of the plateau seemed content to mill about there, looking up at us, their trademark flailing whips now reminding me of nothing so much as fists shaken in anger.

Kathy Ng intoned, "The natives are restless."

She gave it the special emphasis she used whenever she lifted a quote from the archaic adventure fiction she enjoyed so much; I'd never heard it before. "Do you think we're going to have to fight them?"

"They certainly look like they're trying to give us the impression,

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don't they?" She bit her lower lip hard enough to turn it white. "I just hope it's just their ancestral scare-the-shit-out-of-the-bipeds dance, or something."

"Ancestral or not, it's working."

Our chief exopsychologist, Dr. Simmons, tsked paternally. "You're being ethnocentric, people. We can't say they're acting hostile just because, to our eyes, it happens to look that way. Especially since, in all the years we've been here, nobody's ever seen the Vlhani react to any conflict in an aggressive or violent fashion."

"What about the Ballet?"

"That's violent, all right...but it's not conflict. It's a highly stylized, intricately planned annual ritual, choreographed down to the very last step. Which means that it's about as relevant to typical Vlhani behavior as your birthday party is to the remaining four-hundred-and-ninety-nine days of the year."

"Which would make me feel a lot better," said Rory Metcalf, "if not for one thing."

"What's that?"

"This Ballet hasn't been typical at all."

That started everybody arguing at once. I missed most of what got said because Oskar Levine chose that moment to scurry out of the main building and summon me to Dhiju's quarters. I hesitated just long enough to spare one more look at the army of Marionettes gathering down below, contemplate how long we'd be able to hold them off if we had to, and realize that if it came to that, we wouldn't even be able to slow them down. We were a peaceful embassy on a peaceful world; we had nothing to fight them with beyond a few inadequate hand-weapons. We might as well start stockpiling sticks and stones...and if it came to that, we were all dead.

I shuddered and went to see Dhiju.

A funny thing. Desks, as practical pieces of office furniture, have been obsolete for over one thousand years. They were helpful enough when most work was done on paper, or on computer screens that needed to be supported at approximately eye-level...but since none of that's true anymore, desks no longer serve functions important enough to merit all the space they take up. They're still used only because they're such

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effective psychological tools. There's something about the distancing effect of that great smooth expanse that inherently magnifies the authority figure seated on the other side. And men like Dhiju know it. When I ran into his office, he was in position behind his, glowering as if from Olympus.

He gestured at the hytex projection floating in the air beside his desk. There were four main images fighting for supremacy there: a panoramic view of the amphitheater, where the participants in the Vlhani Ballet still stood motionless, patiently waiting for the show to go on; another view of the Vlhani gathering at the base of our plateau; the surveillance image of Isadora, serenely doing multijointed leg lifts in the Isolation Lab; and finally, a head shot of Hurrr'poth, looking as grave as his inexpressive Riirgaani face ever allowed him. I was unsure which image I was supposed to look at until Hurrr'poth swelled to fill my entire field of vision. The giant head turned to face me. "Alex," he said. "The pornographer."

"Hurrr'poth," I said. "The criminal."

He trilled, but it struck me as the Riirgaani equivalent of forced laughter: it went on a little too long, and failed to convey any amusement at all. "I thank you for coming, Alex. This is a very important communication, and since you were with Isadora in the Ballet, I felt that you might possess the keen perspective that your Ambassador Dhiju seems to lack. — Have I disturbed you in any way?"

I glanced at Dhiju, saw only anger, and remained mystified. "Uh...no. How can I help you?"

"You can listen," said Hurrr'poth. "I was telling your Ambassador, here, that I speak not only as the chosen interpreter of the Vlhani people, but as the elected representatives of all the other embassies stationed on Vlhan. The Vlhani have spent the past several hours communicating their wishes on this matter, and we are at their request lodging an official protest against your embassy's continuing interference with the indigenous culture of this planet."

Dhiju made an appalled noise. "This is like something out of Kafka."

"I am unfamiliar with that term, ambassador, but the Vlhani are trying to be fair about this. They understand that, armed with insufficient information, you and Alex acted to preserve the life of a fellow member of your species. They know that this was only natural, under the circumstances, and they bear you no ill will for doing what seemed to make sense

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at the time. Indeed, they respect you for it. But they also believe that they've shown you they consider the woman Isadora an integral part of this year's Ballet...and that, by irresponsibly prohibiting her return to the amphitheater, you are inflicting irrevocable damage upon the most sacred ritual of their entire culture. They demand that you surrender her at once, so the Ballet can continue."

"Will she die in the Ballet, like they do?"

"Of course," said Hurrr'poth.

"Then the answer's No," said Dhiju.

"You are interfering with a tradition that has lasted hundreds of generations."

"I am deeply sorry about that, Mr. Hurrr'poth. But Isadora's not a member of Vlhani tradition. She's a human being, and as such part of a tradition that abhors suicide. Nobody authorized her presence here, and I'm not about to authorize her participation in any ceremony that ends with her death. The Vlhani will just have to understand that."

Then Hurrr'poth did trill: but it was a grim, bitter form of amusement...one I never would have expected from a sentient I'd imagined a harmless eccentric. "Sir: you are an idiot."

Dhiju's natural impulse to show anger crashed head-on with his professional duty to be totally courteous to all the other members of every alien delegation at all times. "Pray tell. Why?"

"Her presence here is not up to you to authorize. It is up to the Vlhani. It is their law and their judgment that applies on this world, and they have clearly recognized her and welcomed her and honored her with an integral position in their Ballet. When you behave as if you are the sole arbiter of who is and who is not supposed to be here, you demonstrate that you understand even less about this species than you understand about your own — which, if you still think the young lady doesn't know what she's doing, is saying a lot. If you persist in this course of action, you will only get the Vlhani more angry at you than they already are. And everything that happens from this moment on will be on your head."

I broke protocol by interrupting: "Are you saying they'll attack?"

Hurrr'poth faced me directly. "Yes."

We had no way of knowing that the first skirmish had already taken place; neither Dhiju or I even happened to think of Kevin McDaniel or

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Li-Hsin Chang, who were half a world away, and well outside the usual Vlhani habitat. After a moment, Dhiju just said, "Understood. I'll be back in touch with you as soon as I confer with my people."

"You are making a terrible mistake! The Vlhani — "

Dhiju thumbed a pad beside him. The hytex projection folded up, shrank into a mote of blackness the size of a pea, then faded. Dhiju stuck out his lower lip, made a "t-t-t-t-t" sound from somewhere deep in his throat, and aside from that, remained in place, apparently finding volumes of meaning in the way his hands sat on the smooth desk before him. Eventually, he just said, "Susan." And a new hytex projection took the place of the one he'd taken away: this one the static image of a girl in her early teens. She was fresh-faced, but wan, and she smiled in the patently artificial way that's been common to all portraits, captured by any recording media, since the beginning of time.

"My daughter," he said.

I had no idea what to say. So I lied. "She's pretty."

"You think so? — The truth is, I barely even saw her after she turned nine. Her mother and I became just too much of a bad mistake together, and I found it easier to stay away, on one off-world assignment after another. I got letters and recordings, but saw her in person maybe for a couple of months out of every year. And then, one day, when she was fifteen, a friend at a party introduced her to the latest fashionable import from off-world: a sort of...vibrating jewel...capable of directly stimulating the pleasure centers of the brain...." He shuddered. "It took six months, Alex. Six months of killing herself a little bit more every day. Six months I didn't even get to hear about until I was rotated home and found her gone."

He sat there, thinking about that a while, letting Susan's enlarged, joylessly smiling face accuse him at length.

And then he said: "Every once in a while, some poor bastard gets saddled with the kind of impossible decision that destroys his career and makes his name a curse for the next hundred years. — Go tell the others we're evacuating. Deadline one hour. After that we're taking the little gatecrasher with us and leaving everything we haven't packed behind. Then we'll take the transports into orbit and wait there until we can summon a ride home."

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My heart pounding past the threshhold of pain, I stepped toward him, faced his gray, deceptively watery eyes, and choked out what he already knew: "They'll never let us back. You'll be throwing away all our relations with the Vlhani, and everybody at home will blame you. You know that."

"Yes. I do." He looked past me, past the hytex projection, past the wall, and past the entire worsening crisis, and said: "But at least this time I'll be here to save her."

9.

The Vlhani were a black horde, covering the hills like flies; and though there were far, far more of them than anybody had ever documented in one place before, it was still impossible to look at them without sensing deliberate choreography at work. Even when threatening war, everything they did was still a dance, albeit a different kind of dance, with nothing graceful or balletic about it. This time, it was more like a march of death, their normally fluid gait reduced to something joyless and rigid that seemed as forced and unnatural coming from them as a goose-step coming from Man. They were packed most densely in the rocky terrain at the foot of our plateau, more crowded by far than anything I'd seen in the amphitheater, but never advancing beyond the rocks, even when the competition for space flattened them like creatures being crushed against an invisible wall. If that wall crumbled, the wave of Vlhani swarming up the slope would be upon us in seconds.

There weren't many people visible; everybody was too busy performing the frantic business of a last-minute evacuation. That mostly meant clearing out the food stores, the infirmary, the records, and the tool lab; but everybody was human enough to spend a few precious seconds in their own quarters sweeping them clear of anything so personal we couldn't bear to leave it behind. There wasn't much of that, though; indentured diplomats don't get much space for clutter. All I had was a pocket hytex and a length of severed Vlhani whip I'd salvaged from the amphitheater after last year's Ballet; I irradiated it regularly to discourage decomposition, but time had taken its toll anyway and the chitin that had once been harder than steel was now soft and spongy and cracked at the edges. Only a few days ago, an unworthy part of me had looked forward to the mass

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carnage at the Ballet so I could later search the amphitheater for a new coil to seal in permaglass. I remembered that, shuddered, and left the old one untouched on the shelf beside my bed. It was Vlhani, and if we were truly leaving, it belonged to Vlhan.

With twenty minutes to go, it fell to me, as the closest thing we had to an expert on the Isadora problem, to figure out a way to get her onto a transport safely. After all, her enhancements made her physically more than a match for any of us; if she decided to resist, she could easily be as formidable as a Vlhani. Drugs were out, since so much of her was artificial that nobody had any idea how to even begin to figure out what dosages would be safe or even effective on those portions of her anatomy that remained, and the embassy didn't stock anything that could restrain her or be legitimately used as a weapon.

In the end, I snagged Oskar Levine — who, as I've said, I'd never liked much, but who happened to be the only person not doing anything — and armed him with two tanks of compressed cryofoam from the infirmary, one hose strapped to each arm. We kept the stuff on our skimmers in case of injuries in the field; we hadn't used any at the embassy itself since last year, when Cecilia Lansky came down with a rare form of cancer we couldn't cure on-site and had to be stored on ice until we could send her home for treatment. There was enough in those two tanks to wrap up a single full-grown Vlhani. If Isadora tried to break, Oskar would foam her.

He tried to talk me out of going in. "Use the intercom. Turn off the field, tell her to come out, I'll get her in the doorway. It'll be fast and easy."

"I know. But I still think I can turn this thing around. I want to talk to her first."

He gave me the kind of look most people reserve for irredeemable idiots. "If you walk out together, and I see no reason to trust her, I'll foam both of you."

"That's reasonable enough. Long as you get me on a transport."

"Fine," he said. "Give me more work to do."

"Oskar...!"

"It's a joke, jerkoff. Don't worry about it, I'll take care of you either way."

She'd pulled out the folding cot built into the rear wall of the chamber, and curled up to sleep there; a reasonable enough thing to do, given the

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circumstances, but still one that surprised me, as it was the first genuinely human gesture I'd ever seen from her. Somehow, without my ever realizing it, I had come to think of her as far beyond such considerations as any other perfectly designed machine. But she didn't look like a machine now: she didn't even look adult. With her eyes closed, and her knees hugging her belly, and her hands tightly clasped beside her chin, she resembled nothing so much as a little girl dreaming of the magic kingdoms that existed only inside her head. The tattoos on her cheeks could have been make-believe war paint, from a game played by a child...

Something stirred in me. A connection, with something. But whatever it was, was too unformed for me to make any sense of it yet.

I knelt down beside her and said: "Isadora."

The illusion of normalcy was broken as both her arms and legs uncoiled, like liquid things that had never been restricted by bones. When her eyes opened they were already focused on me: wholly unsurprised by my presence, wholly unintimidated by anything I might have to say. The shadow of a smile played about her lips, revealing a warmth that surprised me. She did not get up: merely faced me from that position, and said. "Alex."

"I thought you'd like a progress report."

She refused to blink. "That's fuzzy-pink of ye."

"The Vlhani have surrounded us. Dhiju's practically thrown away his career by giving the order to evacuate. We're packing up, getting out, and taking you with us."

She hugged her coiled arms a little closer to her chest. "I don't want to go."

"Like hell," I said softly. "Whatever else you are, Isadora, you're far from stupid. You knew we were watching the Ballet, you knew we would spot you, you knew we'd be honor-bound to try to stop you, and you knew how the Vlhani would react if we succeeded. You could have avoided this whole crisis by explaining everything in advance, or by enhancing yourself so much we couldn't distinguish you from a Vlhani. Instead, you just made a surprise appearance — and got exactly the response you expected."

Her eyes closed. "I didn't ken what ye could do to get me out. Had no idea I'd waltz into a boyo gallant enough to hold himself hostage for me."

Her tone put the word gallant in little quotes, defanging it, making it

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a joke...but not a bitter one. Encouraged, I pushed on: "And that's the real reason you're withholding the explanations, isn't it? Even why you're using that ridiculous dialect of yours, when you've already proven you can abandon it when you want to. Not because you're trying to negotiate your way back to the dance. But because you're trying to put off going back. You don't really want to die. You're looking for a way out. Any way out."

"There is no way out."

"Just refuse to participate!"

"I can't do that. It will ruin the show."

"So one year's Ballet gets ruined, and the Vlhani are traumatized. But there's another Ballet next year. So what? What's really at stake here, Isadora? Why are they so determined to get you back?"

"Ye wouldn't ken."

"I...ken...enough to know when they're angry, and when they're afraid, and when they're so desperate they don't know what to do...but most importantly, enough to know when they're holding back. They could have overrun us a couple of hours ago, and they haven't. Because they don't want to hurt us. They don't want to hurt anybody...but they're still ready to march all over us to get you back. Why is that, Isadora? What's so special about you that they can't just replace you with one of their own? And what's so special about them that you can't say no?"

In the silence that followed, I could almost hear Oskar fidgeting, outside the door...maybe even Dhiju himself checking his timetables and demanding to know just where the hell I was...but it was worth it. Her eyes glistened, and she faced her delicately tooled fingers. "Alex...have you ever dreamed of something so much, for so long, that you had to have it...even though you still weren't certain it was what you wanted?"

I just waited.

She still didn't look at me. "If I tell you, will it get me back to the Ballet?"

"Maybe yes and maybe no...but either way it might stop a whole lot of good people from getting hurt."

She sat up then — a wholly unremarkable act rendered remarkable by the graceful precision with which she performed it. When a normal person rises from a prone position, their center of gravity shifts. Their muscles come into play, and there's a subliminal moment of danger when they're

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momentarily off-balance. It's not something you notice in the way normal people move...unless you've seen Isadora, simply gliding from one position to the other. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, smiled ruefully, and once again spoke in a voice free of the thick accent she'd used to define herself for me. "Have to hand it to you, Alex...you know what strings to pull."

I rose from my kneeling position and sat down beside her. "I better. We're on a planet of Marionettes."

She snorted. "Should I go for twenty-five words or less?"

"Let's not limit ourselves."

"When I was eight years old, I was living in my Uncle's house, as his provisional ward pending...well, where I came from, there was a whole legal lexicon for such things, and I don't really have to go into it. The Steinhoff recordings of the '57 Ballet had just come out; I had myself plugged into the neurec, with the feed down low so I could still pay attention to everybody else in the house...not full gain, because I always had this need to know everything that's going on around me. And my Uncle and his husband were plugged in too, also low because they were the kind of people who couldn't ever stop talking about everything they saw, and my Uncle recited something straight off the hytex about how dark and mysterious the Vlhani were, and how their minds were so dark and alien that no human would ever understand them.

"It was the sort of platitude-laden gibberish that people learn to repeat so they can imagine themselves clever without ever bothering to think an original thought themselves. And I was eight years old...mesmerized by what I was watching...and I knew that what my uncle was saying was gibberish. Because it was the third recording I'd seen, over the past few months...and I was beginning to have some idea what the Vlhani were getting at."

I swallowed. "How?"

"Crod it, I don't know. Maybe it's just some quirk in me that visualizes things differently, something in my perceptions that's a little more Vlhani than human being...and maybe I was just young and impressionable enough to let the message seep through. Maybe it's even a question of talent...something that transcended species and gave me the ability to understand when you and Dhiju and my Uncle just saw dancing buggies. But put that aside. What matters is that I saw one tiny aspect of

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the Ballet *clearer* than the Vlhani. I saw a critical flaw in their performance, something they didn't even see themselves...something that made their Ballet a lie, and that only I knew how to correct." She groped for my hand, found it, and gave me a tight squeeze. "I can't describe what it was like, Alex. It was like...hearing a single discordant note in the greatest symphony ever written...and knowing that only I knew how to correct it. And that night I slipped out the window and ran away from home, determined to make it to Vlhan."

I squeezed her hand right back. It felt human enough: nothing at all like the intricate arrangement of circuitry and plastics I knew it to be. "You were eight years old. How far could you get?"

"As far as I had to. You don't understand: I wasn't really eight years old anymore. The part of me that had been a child was dead. In its place was just this hungry, needful thing, with...with a responsibility...." She sighed. "I don't want to tell you all the risks I took, all the laws I broke, all the ways I...indentured myself...to get where I needed to go...but I had a primitive version of these enhancements within two years...and I was on Vlhan, communicating with the spiders, within four. They saw I was right, and let me know that when the time came for them to incorporate my ideas, I would have to be the one to dance them. As I always knew."

"But you're not a Vlhani. You can't move like a Vlhani, no matter what crazy modifications you've made to yourself."

Her nose wrinkled. "Maybe so. But don't you see? That doesn't matter. Art isn't just technique, in any culture...it's also Content. It's understanding not just How, but also What, to express. And while I may not know everything the Vlhani do...the Vlhani still saw that I had something to offer them. Something they hadn't even known they needed. And I've spent all the years since then preparing for that."

"For Death."

"You think I don't have doubts? That I genuinely, honestly want to die? I want to have a life. I want to have all the things other people have. But I have no choice. It's my responsibility. I have to do this."

"No you don't! What if I said that the Vlhani have no right to ask this of you? What if I said that you matter more than the Ballet? What if I said that the Vlhani will just have to muddle along without you, and try again next time?"

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"You'd be demonstrating that you understand nothing," she said. "Remember the Persistence of Vision — "

And maybe it was the sheer madness of everything that had happened between us, and maybe it was the memory of that one moment in the amphitheater when I sensed some small part of how much the Marionettes counted on her, and maybe it was a single moment of perfect telepathy...but all of a sudden the bottom dropped out of the universe, and I understood exactly what she'd been getting at. She saw the light dawn, and the most tragic thing happened to her eyes: they filled up with fresh hope she did not necessarily want.

Her hand squeezed mine again, this time with enough pressure to cross the threshhold of pain. I didn't particularly mind.

I said, "Maybe — "

And that was really all I had a chance to say.

10.

She could have told us we were running out of time. She could have let us know that the Vlhani have a calendar, of sorts — not a written one, since they have no writing, but one they continually calculate themselves, using the passing of the seasons and the movement of the stars across the sky. She could have let us know that they placed an almost astrological importance on such things, especially where the Ballet is concerned; and that while, by their lights, it's all right to put off the Ballet for maybe one or two of their days, everything was lost if they permitted us to delay the festivities much more than that. I'm certain she knew all that: she understood more about the Vlhani than any other human being who had ever lived.

Some of the people who later arrived to pick up the pieces said that Isadora as good as murdered everybody who died. They're wrong. Because Isadora also understood about us, and she knew that we wouldn't have listened, any more than we'd listened to Hurrr'poth, who'd advised me to leave her alone in the first place. And I think that even she never expected the attack to come as soon as it did. If she had, she might have tried to warn us harder...

In any event, we didn't need to see outside to know that something

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very bad was happening. The walls and floor shook hard enough to make me think of charging cavalry, trying but failing to keep out the sounds of the invasion in progress outside: shouting, skimmers flying low overhead, wounds being ripped in buildings, and the thunderous drumbeat of thousands upon thousands of heavy metallic whips pounding holes in the ground. I shouted out the stupidest question imaginable: "Oskar! What's going on out there?"

The voice that emerged from the intercom was sweaty and driven by panic. "I don't know — I'm hearing — "

I found the wherewithal to ask the question properly. "Oskar! Are the spiders attacking?"

A siren wailed. Our emergency warning system. Installed as a matter of policy, not because anybody had ever expected it to be used. Against that, Oskar's voice was tinny and distant: "Yeah. Yeah, Alex, I think they are."

"Shit," I said, with feeling.

Isadora said, "We have to let them know I'm going back to the Ballet."

"To hell with that," I said. I patched in to Oskar again: "All right, stay close. Let us out in two minutes. And keep your hose ready; you might have to use the foam."

Somewhere not very far away, something metallic — a skimmer, probably — smashed into pieces with enough force to drown out every other sound in the universe. The silence that followed was one of those completely soundless intervals that happen randomly even in the midst of totally uncontrolled destruction — that don't signal the end of the destruction, but merely serve to punctuate it, putting everything that follows in parentheses. By the time Oskar spoke again, the pounding had resumed, and I had to strain to make out his voice. He said: "Take your time. I'm sure as hell not going out there alone."

I turned to Isadora. "You guided us past the Vlhani before. You're going to have to do it again."

She was stunned. "It's two completely different situations, Alex. The Ballet was choreographed. I knew every move, I could predict where the Vlhani were going to be. This is chaos: a thousand individuals rioting in panic. I'm not going to have much more of a clue out there than you do. If I don't let them know you're taking me back to the Ballet — "

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"Lie to them."

"Their language can't be lied in. It's...like you said, a holographic imaging system, painting a perception of the world. To lie, I'd have to — "

"Then at least get them to back off while we make our way past them."

"I don't know they'll all listen. Some of them have got to be half-insane with grief. Some of them are going to want to drag me back to the Ballet by force, others are going to hate me so much that they'll fall all over themselves trying to kill me. I don't know if — "

I grabbed her by the upper arm. "Isadora. Enough of Can'ts. Can you at least get us to a skimmer and into the air?"

She stared at me, stunned. "Just us?"

"And Oskar. And anybody else we can save. Can you do that?"

For one horrible second there, I thought she was going to offer the condition that I allow her to return to the Ballet. I thought that she truly wouldn't care about all our lives, or for anything beyond going back to this destiny she'd selected for herself; that she would seize upon the opportunity to blackmail us into giving her what she wanted. I expected it. I waited for it.

Her eyes narrowed. And she said: "Yeah. I can try."

I had Oskar reverse the field, and we ran for it.

11.

Neither Oskar nor I had the time to find and don a whip harness, but by the time we got outside, we saw that they would have been superfluous anyway.

The compound had been overrun by Vlhani.

A dozen had attacked the dormitory building. Four were on the roof, punching holes in the building with repeated blows from their long flailing whips. The rest had staked out the windows, and were busily using their whips to probe inside. One gave a sharp tug, and pulled something scarlet and ragged and human out the window.

One of the spiders towered over Foster Simmons and Kathy Ng, rotating in place so quickly that its whips strobed, becoming a transparent gray blur, behind which Foster and Kathy knelt bloody and imprisoned

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and screaming. The spider didn't seem particularly inclined to tighten its grip and slice them to ribbons — but they must have tried to get past it, because Foster's severed hand lay by itself only a few feet away. His whip harness whined *Hurt Help Hurt Help*, to no avail. I couldn't see enough to tell if Kathy was hurt too.

Rory Metcalf and a bunch of others had gotten to one of the skimmers. They'd managed to take off, but a group of three Vlhani anchored to the ground had reached up and wrapped their whips around the housing. The skimmer strained in mid-air, veering from one side to the other in a vain attempt to break free. Rory pounded at one of the whips with her bare hands. As I watched, the skimmer lurched in a random direction and was promptly reined back in, but not before a burly figure I recognized as Wesley Harris flipped over the side and hit the ground hard.

Ambassador Dhiju staggered through the midst of the carnage, clearly moved by it without ever being touched by it; beyond the fresh bruise on his forehead and a shallow cut on his upper arm, he wasn't hurt at all. He walked blindly, without making any special attempt to avoid the Marionettes striding back and forth across the compound; and though they made no special attempt to avoid him either, their long sinuous whips stabbed the ground to the right and the left and the rear of him without once hitting him. When I got close enough to grab him by the hand I took a close look at his eyes and recognized his secret as the luck of the intoxicated: in trying to dull the pain of what had to be the greatest defeat of his life, he'd pumped himself up with so many recreationals that he simply didn't see anything unusual about the chaos around him. I had to shout his name three times before he recognized it and followed us.

A ten-whip Marionette slashed at me. A cold wave knocked me back; I hit the ground with patches of cryofoam stealing pieces of sensation from my upper arms. The Marionette lay on the ground, four of its whips paralyzed, the others still flailing. Oskar stared, unwilling to believe that he was the one who'd brought it down. I caught a momentary glimpse of the dormitory building collapsing in on itself, saw Isadora frantically signing something in the air above her head, then spotted the silver glint of parked skimmers behind the commissary. There were several Vlhani blocking the way between us and that holy grail, but it was as good a direction as any. I yanked the mumbling Dhiju out of the nearest

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Marionette's reach, and yelled "There!" We ran for it.

On our way there, the Marionette tethering Rory's skimmer succeeded in upending it and tossing her out. Half a dozen indentures, some already wounded, fell too far to the ground. I turned, and caught a glimpse of Rory getting batted to one side by a flailing whip. She got up limping and with one hand clutched to her side. The three Vlhani released the now unoccupied skimmer (which rocketed over the edge of the plateau and plowed at full speed into a fresh assault wave of Vlhani), then converged upon her. I heard her shout as three of the newer indentures, who'd somehow avoided getting hurt or killed or trapped so far, overcame their panic enough to dart in her direction. One went down. I didn't get to see what happened to Rory or the others, because that's when the big bull Vlhani got me.

It wasn't the first time I'd been lifted into the air by a Marionette. They were peaceful, playful people most of the time, and some of them liked to hoist humans in their whips as a way of saying hello. They'd always indicated their intentions before doing so, and always shown a keen and gentle understanding of the fragility of human flesh. Not so now. This one looped its whip around me from behind and yanked me into the air with a force that realigned my vertebrae. I didn't know I'd been grabbed until I was already off the ground, being spun around and around so fast that the compound and the people and the rampaging Marionettes were reduced to undifferentiated streaks of color. As its whip tightened around my belly, the air whuffed from my open mouth, and I realized that this was the moment I was going to die.

And then the world stopped spinning and about thirty seconds later my head stopped spinning with it and I stared dazed and confused at a sky dominated by the sun, which abruptly up-ended and was replaced by the ground as the whip holding me circled around and showed me the reason I wasn't dead.

Isadora.

Face flushed, eyes desperate.

Forehead covered with a sheen of fear.

Arms in the air, twisting into impossible wrought-iron loops and curves, circling around each other in ways that hurt the mind to imagine.

The Marionette lowered me gently to the ground, placing me in a

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standing position, though I was so dizzy that I almost immediately tumbled to my knees. Then it not only stood guard over us, as Oskar and Isadora helped me to my feet; but also silently escorted us, as they helped Dhiju and me stumble drunkenly toward the skimmers.

There were five of the vehicles parked behind the commissary. None were intact. The Vlhani had pounded three into unrecognizable masses of twisted metal and plastic; torn out the hytex and propulsion systems of the fourth; turned the fifth into a collection of dents and broken instrumentation that may have looked like hell, but seemed capable of wobbly flight. The seats had been ripped out, leaving only the metal housings. We got in anyway. The Vlhani protecting us merely looked down at us impassively, flailing its whips in a manner that could have meant anything at all.

I managed to ask Isadora one question as Oskar lifted off: "Did you tell it you were going back to the Ballet?"

She refused to look at me. "I told you: it's next to impossible to lie to them. I don't know enough of the future to promise that."

"Then...what did you tell it?"

"That you were my friend. And that, whatever happened, I wouldn't dance if you died."

Oskar flew low over the embattled compound, looking for other people to save. Everybody we saw was either dead or too tightly surrounded by Vlhani to go after. I saw several indentures running zigzags through the wreckage, clumsily dodging the whips that herded them from one near miss to the next. I saw a few others who through exhaustion or despair had simply given up running; they knelt in the middle of the carnage, hostages to the mercy of the spiders. About half the people I saw were wearing whip harnesses, their little windup cables seeming a pathetic joke in light of all the real whips raining destruction all around them.

The one time Oskar saw an opportunity to save somebody, and tried to go in, about twenty Marionettes went after us, with great springing leaps that drove them thirty meters straight up. We hadn't expected that at all; none of us, with the possible exception of Isadora, even had any idea they could jump. One collided with the skimmer so hard we almost flipped, then grabbed at us in a clumsy attempt to grab hold before falling

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back down to earth. Oskar took us a hundred meters higher up, circled away from the plateau to put us even further out of their reach, then wiped fresh blood from a gash in his forehead and said: "So? Is there even anyplace to go?"

Dhiju murmured something incomprehensible. Isadora and I glanced at each other. We held the look a little longer than we had to, exchanging recriminations, apologies, thanks, regrets...and more. Neither one of us wanted to break the silence.

In the end, I spared her that much, at least.

I said, "The amphitheater."

12.

We were damaged too badly to make top speed, but the wind-bubble did curl over us when we asked it to, so we were able to go supersonic. At that, it would take us three hours instead of the usual forty minutes to reach the amphitheater...which simultaneously seemed too long and not long enough.

I called the Riirgaans. They patched me through to Hurrr'poth, who was — unsurprisingly — already in the air taking a rescue squad to our plateau. He'd started prepping the mission when I pulled Isadora from the Ballet. He'd suspected what was coming, too; had even tried to warn me, more than once. Even so, I had trouble seeing his help as magnanimous. When he jokingly called me pornographer, I disconnected him.

Less than two hours passed before Oskar and I used up our store of conversation, and Isadora crawled off into the rear screen to stare wordlessly at the landscape racing by down below. Under the circumstances, I was almost grateful when awareness limped back into Dhiju's eyes. He croaked: "Y-you're not taking her back..."

I spoke in a tightly controlled whisper, because I didn't want Isadora to hear. "I'm sorry, sir. But yes, we are."

He tried to muster up enough strength to be indignant. "I...specifically ordered..."

"I know. And I'm still hoping to work out a way where it doesn't have to happen. But we have to do this. We have no choice."

"They're killers," he said, almost petulantly. "We owe them nothing.

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Now that they've murdered everybody, they don't even have anything left to threaten us with. We don't have to throw good blood after bad. We can still get her off-world. We can still save her. We can still..."

"The persistence of vision," I murmured, hearing not my own voice, but hers.

"What?"

"The persistence of vision." When Dhiju showed no signs of comprehension, I shook my head, as if sheer denial could erase everything I knew. Oskar must have sensed something wrong, just about then, because he left the controls and took a seat between us, looking haggard and grim and desperate to understand. I didn't acknowledge him, or even Dhiju; at the moment, I was too lost in the size of it, too unable to fit other people into a universe which had suddenly changed all shape and form. "You can't even blame them," I said, distantly. "They thought they were going to lose everything. They had to go mad."

"You're not making any sense," crabbed Dhiju.

Isadora didn't turn around even then; but then she didn't have to. I knew she was listening. I shook my head to fight off the shock, and spoke as earnestly as I could, in words meant for all of us. "It's not something I'm comfortable knowing, sir. But with all the things she's said, and all the things that have happened, I've begun to understand, a little. And I've learned...that we never had the slightest idea how big this was, for them. We knew their language was holographic. We knew they were drawing pictures for each other. We knew that whatever they were making with the Ballet was more important to them than their lives. And we were right about all that. But we also thought that a new Ballet began and ended every year...and in that we were wrong. The picture they paint, sir...it's just a single frame. And it blends together, in their minds, with the picture they painted last year...and the one they're going to paint one year from now. All arranged in sequence, and merged by the persistence of vision..."

"A motion picture," Oskar said hoarsely.

Dhiju's eyes flickered in his direction, then bored in on mine. "So?"

"So that's why she can't quit. For the same reason she surrendered when I threatened my own life. Because she's driven by responsibility. And she knows that if she quit it wouldn't just ruin one Ballet — which

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would traumatize the whole species but still leave them room to rebuild. No. It would shatter a single evolving work of art that they've been creating for the better part of their history. It would destroy everything they've ever been, everything they've ever dreamed about, and everything they've ever tried to accomplish. It would leave them with nothing to live for. And that's why she can't quit. Because it's either her life...or the lives of every Vlhani that ever lived."

Oskar breathed, "Holy," utterly forgetting to specify a Holy What.

Dhiju remained silent. He just looked at me, and then at Oskar, and then at Isadora, who still sat staring out the screen, giving no indication that she heard any one of us. And then he turned back to me, and said, "I'm sorry, Alex. But even if this theory bears any relation to reality, which I doubt, it changes nothing. I'm still ordering you to stop her."

Dammit, he had to understand. "Like I said, sir...I intend to try. I don't want her to die any more than you do. But the Vlhani — "

He drowned me out. "The Vlhani are not my problem! It's not my fault they've dedicated themselves to this thing! Their insanity is not my responsibility — and hers is! I won't let her kill herself! And I'm ordering you to turn this crate around and demand asylum at one of the other embassies!"

"I can't. I have to leave our options open...in case there's no other way."

Dhiju stared, unwilling to believe that a third-year indenture would risk everything by daring to defy him. He wrested control of his voice, and spoke with the kind of controlled quiet that can be heard in the middle of an explosion. "Alex. If you don't do what I say within the next five seconds, I'll consider it a gross act of insubordination and extend your contract fifty years."

Oskar said: "Then you'll have to extend mine too."

I glanced at Oskar, astonished. I hadn't expected him to join in my mutiny; I'd been counting on Isadora to help me overcome the two of them. But he faced Dhiju with the stoic intractability of a brick wall, and he gathered up the cryofoam harness, and he held it in his hand, to demonstrate what awaited if Dhiju tried to interfere in any way. It was funny. I'd never liked him, not even the slightest bit; he'd never been anything more to me than just somebody I had to deal with in order to do

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my job. But right now, I found myself hard-pressed to remember exactly why that was.

As for Dhiju, he nodded, unsurprised, all the strength going out of him all at once. And he reached into the pocket of his tunic and took out one of his vials of blue liquid and swallowed it down in a gulp. He closed his eyes before we got to see them go fuzzy and dilated again, and murmured, "You're both throwing away the rest of your lives."

I began to protest, but Oskar rode me out. "No, Alex...that's fair. Get out of the way and I'll foam him, so he doesn't have to watch."

After a moment, I complied. Why not? Had I been in Dhiju's position, I wouldn't have wanted to be conscious either. And the ambient temperature in the skimmer dropped thirty degrees as the liquid bubbling sound filled the air around us.

13.

I sat beside Isadora for much of the hour that remained of our flight, not speaking, just making my presence known. Not that she spent all of that remaining hour or so just looking out the screen. All it showed was a nondescript series of hills and valleys and plains and lakes, none of which were by themselves particularly different from the those that puckered the landscape of ten million other worlds. Sometimes we passed over small herds of Vlhani, who were visible only as black dots against brown fields; if they heard the hum of our drive and looked up, to catch a glimpse of the vehicle bearing this year's most honored dancer, it wasn't what she needed to see. And so she spent most of that last hour just quietly sitting with me, not speaking much, but not remaining entirely quiet either: just sharing the space, and the wait, for that place which we both knew we'd reach all too soon.

Near the end of that hour, I asked her about the markings on her cheeks, already suspecting what she'd tell me. And I was right: they were merely desperate affectations left over from her first few days on her own — the legacy of an eight-year-old girl struggling to re-invent herself as she finagled her way from one world to another. Both they, and her made-up slang, were remnants of a past she'd created for herself — the kind of past that only could have been created by a frightened child forced to become

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adult before her time. I thought about the long hours Rory had spent searching her databases for a society that used those ritual markings, and those idioms...and wondered whether she'd still be alive to laugh about it when I told her.

Not long after that, I began to spot landmarks — the otherwise nondescript rock formations and dried riverbeds that my previous journeys to this place had taught me to recognize as the vicinity of the amphitheater. When Oskar pointed out a cratered plain pockmarked by the tracks of the one hundred thousand Vlhani dancers who had passed this way on their journey to the place where they were scheduled to die, my stomach seized up. And when we saw the Ballet...

...it had always been a magnificent sight. It still was. But today was the first time it filled me with dread.

Seen from a distance, with or without rangeviewers: a sliver cut into the face of the planet, filled with a gleaming black sea that swelled and surged like an intelligent amoeba. With the reflective Vlhani skin glowing red in the light of the rising sun, it looked like a lake of fire. An unworthy part of me wished for plasma cannons so I could make it one.

As we drew closer, we saw that not all of the Vlhani were in the amphitheater itself — there were several hundred gathered above the northern rim, arranged in two semicircular mobs with a single wide pathway between them. The pathway led straight to the heart of the Ballet. An invitation, set out for Isadora.

As for the viewing stand on the opposite rim: it was packed again. Not quite to capacity — since this time, there were no humans and only a few Riirgaans in the seats — but close enough to let me know that all of the alien delegations had returned to their places, eager to see the Ballet resume as scheduled. From this side of the amphitheater, it was easy to hate them, for their eagerness to see that which I would have given anything to stop. Would any of them mourn the Vlhani who died? Would any mourn Isadora?

Oskar told the skimmer to hover, then came over and knelt beside us. His eyes were tearing. "I was...going over this in my head. About what we're doing...what we're about to let her do. I kept...thinking...that there had to be some other way. And I think I have one."

Isadora's smile was grateful, but without much hope. "Oh?"

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"Participate via hytex."

It hit me like an electric current wired right into the spine. "What?"

"You heard me," said Oskar. He turned to her. "You can dance your part somewhere safe; we'll rig up a micro-remote to hover over the amphitheater and broadcast your image wherever you have to be. You can do everything you have to do without being anywhere near the Vlhani when they start losing muscle control."

My heart pounded in my chest. "Isadora! Would that work?"

She shook her head sadly. "If the Vlhani were human, maybe. But they don't see on the same wavelengths."

"We can recalibrate! Project something they can see! Even sound, if we need to! Dammit, Isadora, we know so much more than you think! Give us a couple of hours to arrange it, and you'll live!"

"But don't you see what an insult that would be? All those Vlhani dying, and their most honored guest staying alive by remote control? Showing herself above them, by continuing to walk and breathe while everybody who waited for her dies? I can't mock them that way. I won't."

"The spiders killed a lot of good people today," Oskar pleaded. "They can use a little mockery."

"I'm sorry," she said, and leaned forward to kiss him. "But, please. I have to do this. If that means anything to you, please land so I can get it over with."

He lowered his head, shuddered, and went off to the controls.

For me, it was not like we were sinking. It was like the ground was rising to meet us; like the entire planet was a single predator, and the horizons were razor-studded jaws inexorably closing shut. It was hard to remember that neither Oscar nor Dhiju nor I were in the same danger Isadora was: if we just stayed in the skimmer, let her disembark and then took off, the only person being swallowed whole today was the strange, beautiful, terrified but unwavering woman who knelt beside me. It didn't make me feel any safer. If she died, it would still be too much like dying myself.

We were still some distance from the ground when I said: "Isadora."

She abandoned the view and looked at me. "Alex."

"Was everything you told the Vlhani true? Back at the compound?"

She smiled sadly. "I told you. It's impossible to lie to them."

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"Then please. Listen. You don't have to do this. There are alternatives. You can make them understand — "

She hugged me. "Thank you. But no. I have to do this."

...and then she tightened her arms on the edge of the Skimmer and lightly jumped to the ground.

We were still about twenty meters up, so both Oskar and I yelped, instinctively certain that she'd just leaped to her death. But no: when I leaned over the edge I saw her lightly touch ground, wave at me, and run toward the amphitheater. She was as fast as one of them; before I even had time to react she had disappeared among the Vlhani.

I wasn't enhanced. There was no way I'd ever be able to catch her. But catching her was not part of the plan. I'd always known that she had to do what she had to do.

Now it was my turn.

I shouted at Oskar. "For Christ's sake! Land this thing! I have to go out there and talk to them!"

"Talk to — " Oskar started. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Just do it! Now!"

He aimed for a spot fifty meters from the Vlhani spectators. As we landed, I said, "Don't wait for me, I'll be okay! Just get back to the embassy and see if you can help any of the others!"

"B-but...what are you talking about, you can't—"

I leaped over the side and hit the ground running.

All my instincts rebelled against the idea of charging creatures whom I'd so recently seen on the rampage. But the part of my mind still capable of remaining rational knew that I'd be in no danger from them at all; they no longer had any need to hurt me. They already had Isadora. If I had any fear at all it was that they would be able to recognize me as the one who'd rescued her once before; that for fear of me doing it again they'd bar my way and refuse to allow me into the amphitheater.

They didn't. The ones on the rim just stood passively by as I ran among them, using the same path they'd cleared for Isadora. Their heads did swivel to watch me as I passed; expressionless globes that could have been registering annoyance, or disgust, or pity, or nothing at all. I like to think that they recognized compulsion when they saw it: that they didn't stop me because they knew stopping me would do no good.

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Maybe, in that, I reminded them of Isadora.

I made it over the edge of the bowl and began to half-run, half-fall, down the slope. It was not a gentle grade, like the place where I'd found her the first time, but a dirt slide that with a few more degrees of pitch would have begun to qualify as a cliff. I couldn't remain upright and stay out of the way of the dancing Vlhani at the same time; I allowed myself to fall on my rear end and slide. I caught a glimpse of the viewing stand on the southern rim and wondered if anybody there could see me; if any of them were feeling little twinges of horror at the thought of the great spectacle being delayed yet again. Not that I cared; all I cared about, all I worried about, was Isadora. And she was nowhere in sight.

I came to rest in a sea of slashing whips. There was blood in my mouth and on the backs of my hands. The Vlhani around me were so densely packed that I couldn't see more than twenty yards in any direction. Their whips, waving in the air above their heads, spun so passionately that the whirrs of their passage drowned out everything, even the ragged rasp of my breath.

Isadora wasn't around to lead me out, this time.

That didn't matter. What mattered was being here.

Because though I didn't understand Vlhani dance (and didn't even have the harness that would have physically equipped me to dance it), the language barrier has always been a poor excuse for not making the attempt to communicate.

And as Isadora herself had said: *Art isn't just technique, in any culture...it's also Content. It's understanding not just How, but also What to express.*

So I stood up, and took a deep breath, and appealed to them in the only way I knew how. With words. I spoke to them in sounds they couldn't possibly understand, hoping that the feelings would come through. I painted a word-picture that not only apologized for never truly understanding them before, but also mourned and celebrated the differences between us. It was a picture that flashed upon my friends lying dead or wounded at the embassy, and of just how many light-years they'd traveled to meet such an end; it was a picture that talked about how they'd deserved more, then came back to Isadora and how she deserved more too. It was a picture of a young woman who'd already given up everything — her

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home, her childhood, her normality, and now, probably, her life — for the Vlhani. I let them know that, however they measured such things, it was a sacrifice: and that it was a sacrifice only they were empowered to stop. And finally, I let them know how beautiful she was: as beautiful, in her own way, as their Ballet, and how much it mattered to me that she still be alive when the last dancing Vlhani fell to the trampled earth.

I never spoke at such length, or with such eloquence, in my entire life.

Had they understood the language, I would have broken their hearts.

But even as I poured everything I had into my words, I knew that I was nothing to them but a yapping little creature making noise. They surrounded me without reacting to me, their great spherical heads bobbing like toys.

And when I finally ran down, exhausted, unable to plead any more, unable to think of anything else that I hadn't already said a dozen times, a Vlhani moved toward me, so gracefully that its whips barely seemed to brush the ground. One of its whips came down, gently curled around my waist, and lifted me up to the head. I had the distinct impression of eyes studying me, even though Vlhani don't have eyes; the head merely rotated first one way, then the other, in no way conveying any expression at all. Out of reflex I reached out and placed a palm against its cool, polished surface, thinking of the alien brain that sat pulsing beneath. What did it think of me? Did it think me strange? Ungraceful? Ugly or beautiful?

It passed me to another Vlhani further up the slope. Which passed me to another one, and then to another one after that; until I was handed over to the ones standing up on the northern rim, who gently put me down and encircled me to ensure I wouldn't dash into the amphitheater again.

They needn't have bothered. I was done.

There was nothing left.

14.

Many hours later, the Riirgaan aircruiser flew in from the south, circled above me, and came to a rest on packed dirt a short distance away. The Vlhani who'd come to watch the Ballet milled around us, taking special care not to step on me or inconvenience the aircraft in any way. Rory and Oskar were both aboard, looking tearful and exhausted. They

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gave me weak little waves as Hurrr'poth hopped over the side, approached me, and then, folding his limbs in a manner that must have been painfully uncomfortable for a Riirgaan, knelt by my side. His face was as expressionless as always, but there was a tentative, concerned, uncharacteristically deferential manner to the way he regarded me. I mistook it for simple respect for my grief, and said nothing.

At length he said, "Alex."

I asked him: "How many dead?"

"Vlhani or humans?"

I was in no mood to care about Vlhani. "You know I meant humans!"

"Seventeen. About half your delegation. Foster Simmons, Li-Hsin Chang, Kathy Ng..." When he saw how every name made me wince, he trailed off. "It could have been much worse. Almost half your number survived."

"And Isadora? Did she?"

He placed a reptilian hand on my shoulder. "No."

So I hadn't pulled off the impossible miracle after all. For all these hours, I'd dared to persuade myself that I might have. I thought of her eyes, and the way she moved, and how I'd been the one to deliver her to the moment of her death, and I just knelt there, my shoulders shaking and my mind spinning between the rustle of the wind and the beating of my triphammer heart.

And then, once again, Hurrr'poth said, "Alex."

I refused to look at him. "What."

"I do not know if this will make a difference to you...but everybody among the spectators saw what you tried to do for her. What you did do for her. Everybody witnessed it: all the delegations....and, soon, thanks to the holos and neurecs, all their worlds."

I closed my eyes more tightly. Yes, that was all I needed. To have the single greatest failure of my life played endlessly throughout the universe. "And?"

"And," he said, "it was not just Isadora and the Vlhani who danced magnificently today."

Whereupon he stood, and returned to the aircruiser, leaving me alone with that.

Neither Hurrr'poth nor Rory nor Oskar came out to hurry me.

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Eventually, I got off my knees, and went to them. Not because I'd accepted what he'd had to say. But because the show was done, and it was time for all the performers to go home.

15.

The Riirgaans offered Oskar and me citizenship and diplomatic immunity. Oskar took the deal, I didn't. Oskar went home, legally nonhuman; I was court-martialed, got twenty years added to my contract, and went to the rancid, half-molten hellhole known as New Pylthothus, where I would be rotting still had I not smuggled myself AWOL two years later. Since then, I've been officially a fugitive. I have no intention of telling you where I am, how I changed my appearance, or what name I use now. I found a world acceptable for spending the rest of my life in hiding; I changed my face and my name and found a life for myself. I have friends, family. It's happiness, of a sort. I'm not complaining.

The Confederacy attempted to suppress the holos and neurecs of that year's Ballet, but when the anger over the violence against our people faded, the recordings still became the biggest thing to hit popular entertainment in centuries. They succeeded in making the long-time interest in the Vlhani an obsession for trillions; even the vast majority who still didn't understand just what the Marionettes were getting at had to agree that, in some indefinable way easier felt than understood, Isadora had just brought their Ballet to an entirely new level. There was some half-hearted talk of reprisals and the "permanent" withdrawal of the installation—but within five standard years the triple-threat combination of a new administration, humanity's notoriously short memory, and the ravenous demand for the new recordings still being made by the other embassies and distributed to human space on the black market, got a new embassy established on the ruins of the old. This one, I understand, is considerably better armed than ours was, though the indentures there haven't yet been forced to prove it.

People love to speculate on who Isadora was, and where she came from; a hundred separate worlds have laid claim to being the place where she was born. Most of them don't put forth very persuasive cases for themselves. All I know for sure is that if I ever did find out the name of the

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place she came from, I wouldn't feel any pressing need to go there. It has nothing to do with her.

Close to three thousand young people have tried to do what Isadora did. The vast majority of those never made it off their own home-worlds; they were dreamers, yearning to be special and willing to do anything to emulate somebody who was. They either destroyed themselves or found somebody else to imitate. Of those who remained, a few actually succeeded in picking up enhancements somewhere: usually, pale imitations of Isadora's that took away their humanity without giving nearly enough in return. A very small number — four women and two men — made it to Vlhan and into the Ballet, where they died. They'd understood little pieces of the show, too. But their names faded. Nobody remembers them the way people remember her.

I don't know. Whatever the Vlhani are relating with this great fatal Ballet of theirs, I'm told it's beautiful and profound and meaningful and worth dying for. But the other side of the story is that it's not worth seeing the people you care about die...and I've personally lost all desire to decode that message for myself.

As a result, I have never seen Isadora's Ballet. I refused to watch it on Vlhan, and I've refused to view the holos or neurecs. I would not be able to stand obsessively watching and re-watching either my own famously doomed appeal or the equally famous, inspirational moment when she fell.

Instead, I live with my memory of that moment at the compound, when she danced to save my life. Unlike the Ballet, which has been picked to pieces by experts all over the known universe, that performance was not recorded. There are no holos, no neurecs, no hytex analysis breaking it down into the tiniest millisecond fragments. Oskar was half-blind from the blood in his eyes; Dhiju, who lay on his back dazzled and open-jawed, was so much under the influence that no amount of artificial memory enhancement would ever succeed in separating the real from that which his mind created. As for me, I caught only the last ten seconds.

But I understood it all. Every single nuance.

When she later spoke to me in human words, she did not tell me the full truth about everything that dance had meant.

And what she really told the Vlhani keeps me warm, in a universe that would otherwise now seem dark and empty and cold.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE, I see lots of good things ahead.

Next month we'll have a gorgeous Tom Canty cover (those words go together almost automatically) illustrating Mary Soon Lee's "Monstrosity," a fable of monsters and castles and brave deeds indeed. But the bravest deeds don't always involve slaying dragons, as you'll soon see.

Jonathan Lethem and Angus MacDonald have teamed up for "The Edge of the Bed of Forever," a strange and slightly surreal story of a time-share arrangement of a different sort...

We'll also join Linda Nagata on a vivid offworld adventure catching sharks in "Hooks, Nets, and Time," and new writer Michael Libling takes us out to the old ball game with his "Mosquito League." You'll think twice about swatting flies after you read this one.

Next month will also mark the arrival of some of our new columnists—in addition to Charles de Lint's recommendations, we'll have Elizabeth Hand covering books for us. And joining Gregory Benford as our regular science columnists, Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty will use their first science column to look at something we can't see. Pat and Paul are colleagues at San Francisco's wonderful Exploratorium museum and their hands-on approach should offer an interesting counterpoint to Dr. Benford's more analytical columns (which will return soon).

And farther ahead, we have terrific things in store for you for the rest of the year, including delightful new stories by Esther Friesner, David Bischoff, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Stephen King, Harry Turtledove, Rand B. Lee, Nancy Springer, Michael Blumlein, John Morressy, and Kristine Kathryn Rusch, as well as a few new voices. I dare say there will be something for everyone and *lots* of things for avid readers like you and me.

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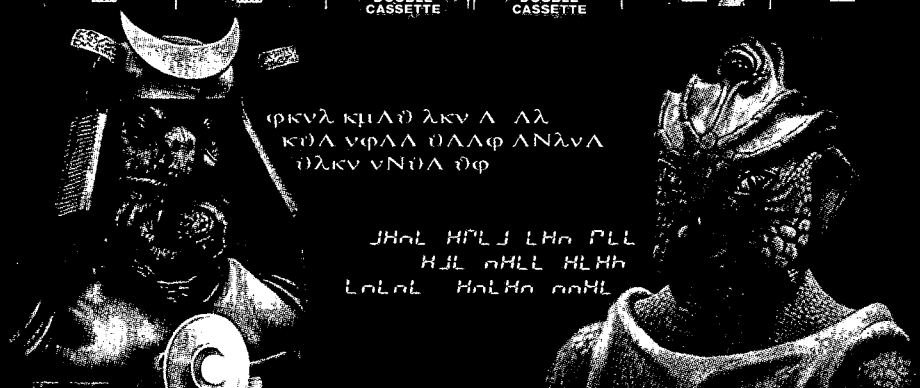

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